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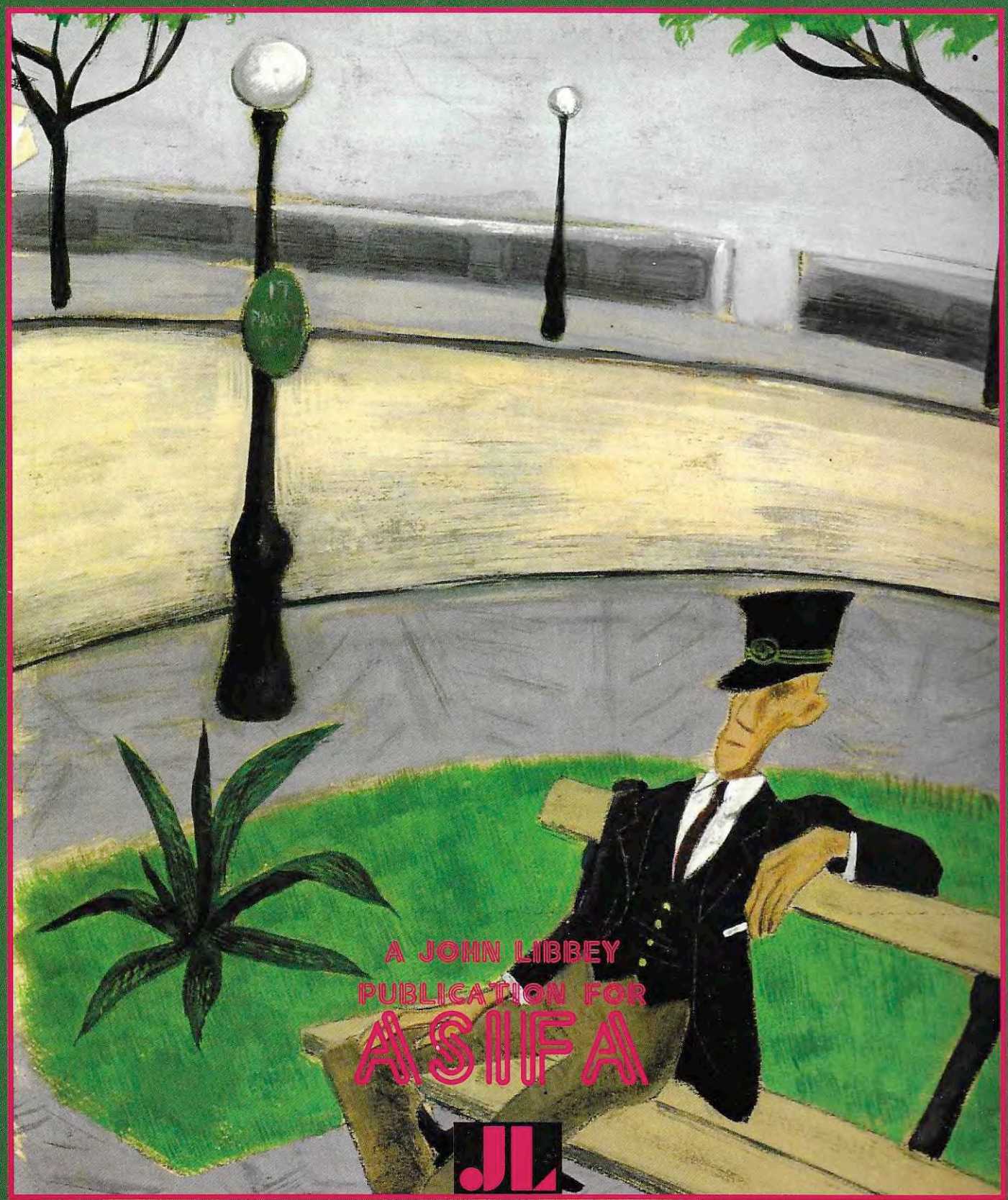

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In Search of John Parr Miller: 1

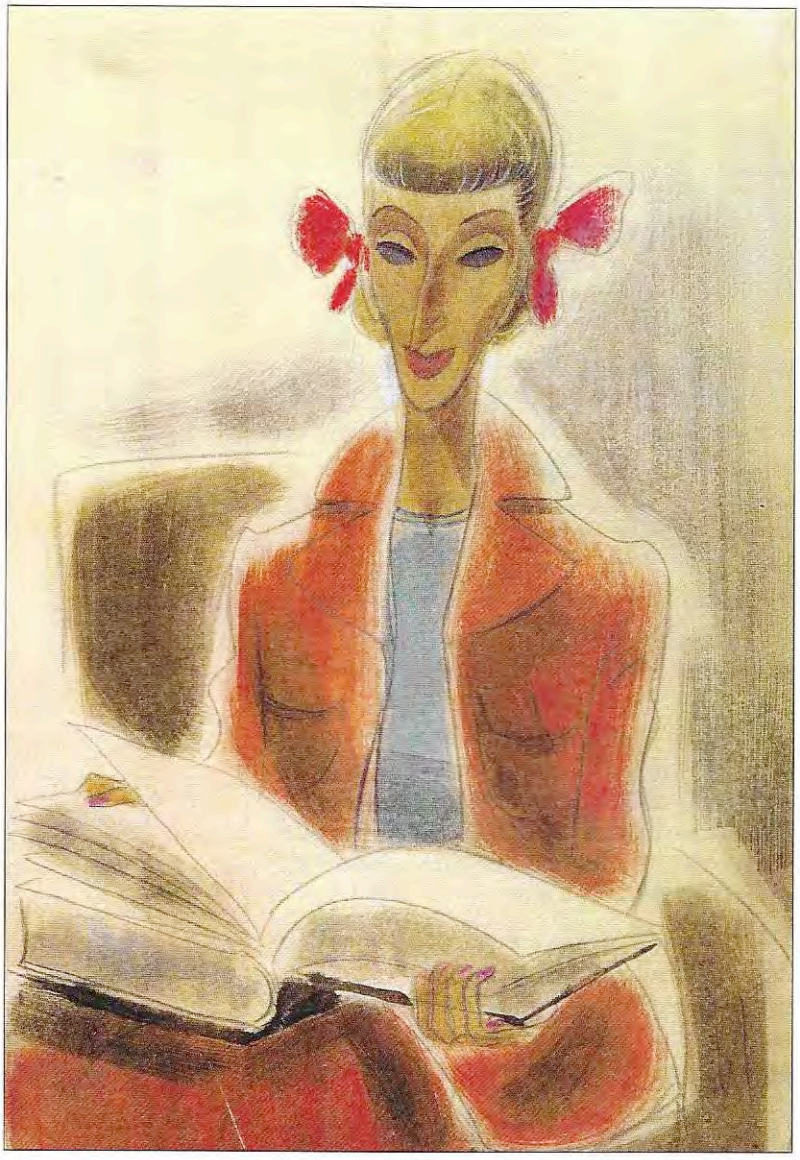
by John Canemaker

The Reluctant Dragon is an odd omnibus feature produced by Walt Disney in 1941 that purports to show how animated cartoons are made. A pseudo-documentary interspersed with animation, the film follows Robert Benchley as he bumbles into various departments at the then-new Disney studio in Burbank, California.

Although a minor film effort, *Dragon* provides a fascinating glimpse into Hollywood's top cartoon factory at the height of its Golden Age. It also contains "Baby Weems," a gem of an animated segment that was (and continues to be) a rare, radical departure from Disney's lushly representational graphic style and "illusion of life" animation.

Famed Warner Bros. cartoon director Chuck Jones once touted the "Baby Weems" sequence as "the first of the restricted-animation pictures, and it's probably the best ever made."[1]

The Weems short appears during a demonstration of how cartoon stories are planned by a team of Disney story artists. Using sequential sketches pinned to a storyboard, the tale is told of a preternaturally intelligent infant who talks at birth, composes and conducts symphonies, defeats champion chess players, and even corrects Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. The world marvels at Baby Weems and the media takes over the wonder child's life. He becomes so celebrated and busy, his parents must make appointments to visit him.



Above: Caricature of Mary Blair in South America by Jack Miller.

In the end, Weems is restored to his family as a normal baby.

But not before the urbane, witty script by Disney staffers Joe Grant and Richard Huemer scores points about America's consumerism, short attention span and thirst for ever-newer fads – subjects even more relevant today than sixty-five years ago.

In keeping with the spirited script, "Baby Weems'" story sketches have satiric bite and a knowing wit. Instead of dimensional, fluidly animated animal characters – as seen in *Dumbo*, also released in 1941 – the story is told through chalk/charcoal drawings of caricatured humans. And, except for a few selective bits of animation, the drawings are still, relying on expressive artwork to communicate and entertain.

"You look at it today," marveled Chuck Jones, "and you wonder why somebody didn't learn from it: when you use limited animation, use good drawing."[2]

The very good "Weems" drawings were made by 27-year old John Parr Miller (1913–2004).

"Jack," to his Disney colleagues, was a key member of the studio's Character Model Department, a unique "think tank" begun in 1937 at Walt Disney's request.

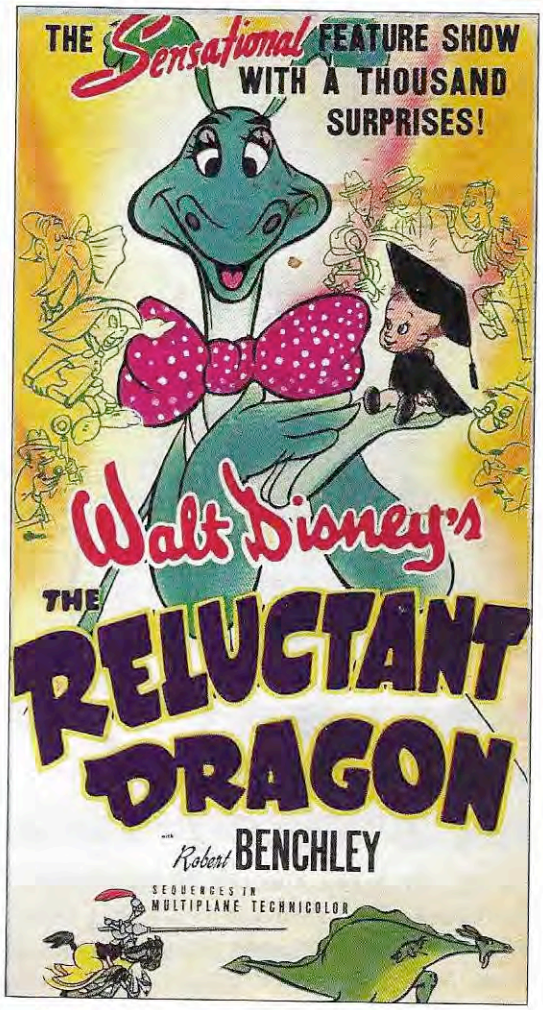
Under Joe Grant's supervision, the unit was comprised of a small group of artists, illustrators, and sculptors who conceptualized and designed characters and environments for *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and *Dumbo*, among other films.

Years later, Grant gave equal credit for the success of "Baby Weems" to both the script and Miller's drawings. "They were fabulous!" he said of the latter. Asked why Disney permitted such a departure from the studio's usual style, Grant replied, "Basically because of Miller's rendition, which is beautiful. And to this day, it's a model for a lot of story people."[3]

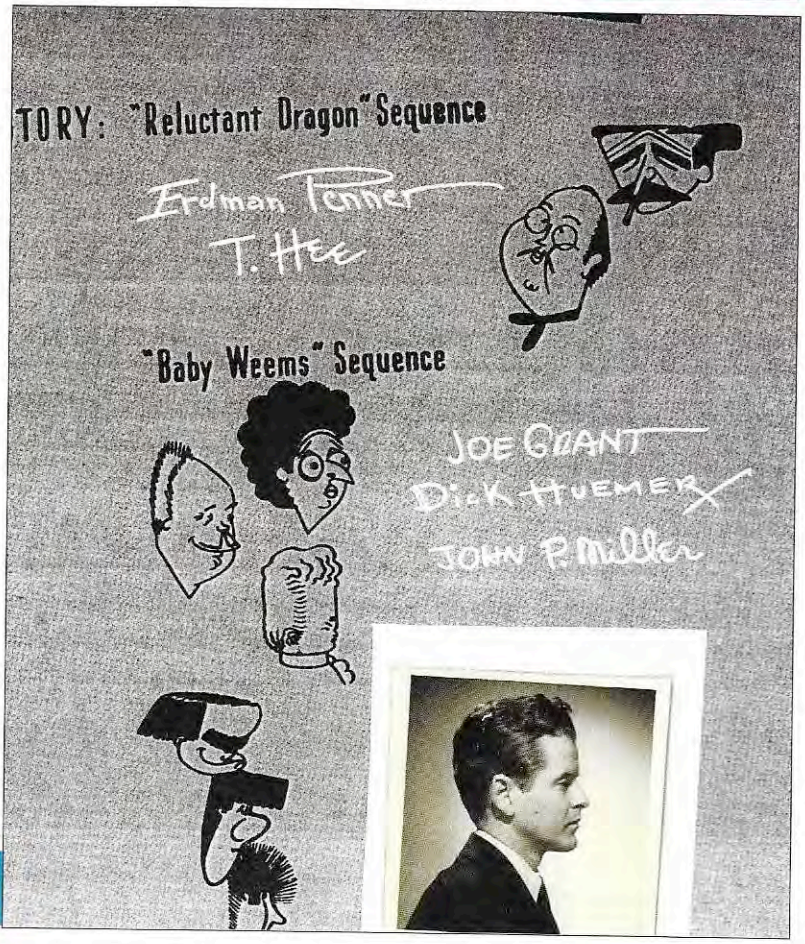
Charming and sophisticated, Jack Miller's cosmopolitan "Weems" story sketches were drawn with a fluid, calligraphic line reminiscent of stylish caricature portraitist Ralph Barton (1891–1931), or the personality-saturated characters and well-planned layouts of cartoonist Abner Dean (1910–1982); but with a warmth and visual appeal that is Miller's own.

The characters' shapes are functional and, if they *were* required to move, highly animate-able. As it is, the figures do not pose statically waiting to be admired, but appear in vital, juicy "acting" poses – actions frozen at the peak of their storytelling potential. Full of personality and verve, the drawings have class.

Above: Poster for Walt Disney's The Reluctant Dragon *(released 20 June 1941). [Copyright The Walt Disney Company.]*



Below: Caricature of Jack Miller in profile drawn by T. Hee for The Reluctant Dragon *screen credits. Photo (inset) of Jack Miller in profile. [Copyright The Walt Disney Company.]*



Sprinkled throughout are well-defined celebrity caricatures (Einstein, George Bernard Shaw, Walter Winchell, Salvador Dali); but minor characters – swarming reporters and cameramen; a slew of doctors and nurses; country oldsters gathered around a tube radio; diverse city dwellers conversing on a subway – are also depicted with individuality.

Settings are amusingly exaggerated in scale and concept: a huge thermometer attached to the Eiffel Tower; vast throngs in St. Peter's Square; Weems' head immortalized in stone on Mr. Rushmore; and so on.

Walt Disney was impressed and Jack Miller's future at the studio seemed secure and promising. He was even included in a select group of studio artists who joined Disney in a research trip to South America in the summer of 1941.

But within the year, Miller had joined the military, and, after World War II, chose not to return to Disney. Instead, he forged a lifelong career as a prolific and popular children's book illustrator, mostly for Golden Books, under the name "J.P. Miller."

J.P. Miller's drawing style differs from Jack Miller's. In painterly Golden Books – such as "Lucky Mrs. Ticklefeather" (1951), "Dr. Squash – The Doll Doctor" (1952) or "The Little Red Hen" (1954) – color, form and pattern take precedence over personality defined by line. Yet Miller's charm, warmth, and gentle fun are always present, as well as his non-stop inventiveness and imagination.

By the time he died in 2004 at age 91, the New York Times noted, J.P. Miller "had about two score books for young children in circulation, including 'Follow Me' (1998) and a version of 'The Little Red Hen,' which he first illustrated half a century ago."[4]

Biographical information has been scant about John Parr Miller, a gifted artist whose characters designs for Disney films continue to enchant – and, in the case of "Baby Weems," to inspire; and whose illustrations for popular children's books have been (and continue to be) beloved by generations of kids and their parents. The lack of substantial knowledge about Miller's life stems largely from the artist's personal reticence and, more darkly, his deep dissatisfaction with his life and career.

For John Parr Miller always "hated what he was doing, but didn't know what it was he wanted to do," according to his half-brother George E. Miller, who recently offered this writer details about the late artist's life.[5] "Despite John's outward charm and good humor, he was tormented by angst."[6]

I am grateful to Mr. Miller and his wife, Deborah, to Mary Miller, J.P. Miller's niece, and to several of J.P.'s friends and professional colleagues (cited below) for their generous help in preparing this first extensive profile of the artist.

The following is Part One of two parts, to be completed in the next issue of *CARTOONS*.

Above: (l. to r.) John Parr ("Jack") Miller, Webb Smith, Mary Blair and Herb Ryman in Rio De Janeiro, 1941.

Below: Original art by Jack Miller from the "Baby Weems" sequence. [Copyright The Walt Disney Company.]

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John Parr Miller was born on 31 August 1913 on New York City's upper west side in a third floor apartment at Clairemont Court. The five-year old luxury building (annual rents ranged from $1,100 to $1,500) located at 546 Riverside Drive near Morningside Heights, boasted five to eight room apartments, each with parlors, libraries and dining rooms containing inlaid parquet floors, bathrooms with porcelain tubs and, in the rear, Hudson River views of the Palisades.

He was baptized at the nearby Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. His parents, Harry James Miller (1875–1933) and Lillian Adelaide (Ada) Parr (b. ? – d. 1927), had two other children: John's older brother Harry James, Jr., known as Jim (1910–1965) and his younger sister, Mary Elizabeth (1915–1985).

Harry Miller, Sr. was a hard-driving, ambitious Midwesterner whose forebearers served Ohio River riverboats at a hotel they owned called The Indian Queen. He was a self-motivated boot-strapper who pulled himself up financially, professionally and socially after quitting school at age twelve to drive a funeral director's hearse.

By the time John Parr was born, ambitious Harry had become the territorial chief of the western sector sales force of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

To advance, let alone survive, as an insurance salesman in that area of the USA at that time required toughness. A photo exists of Harry seated on a buckboard in Wyoming with a friend holding a Winchester rifle. When traveling over dusty, lonely country roads, he always carried $10 appeasement money in case of a robbery attempt, and (as extra "insurance") a monkey wrench under the driver's seat.

In time, Harry became second vice president at Metropolitan Life, the company's third ranking executive, with all the financial and social perks that go with such an exalted position. He belonged to numerous golfing clubs (his den was full of sterling loving cups and trophies), the New York Athletic Club and the exclusive Wykagyl country club in New Rochelle, among others.

Because of their father's success, John Parr Miller and his two siblings enjoyed a "patrician upbringing" in a home complete with a rose garden and the services of a cook, butler and maid in the New York suburb of New Rochelle. The posh living conditions, however, did not protect diminutive John Parr from being targeted for torment by both his brother Jim and schoolyard bullies.

"Being short weighed very heavily" on John throughout his life, recalls George Miller, who was born nineteen years after John, the only child of Harry's second marriage.

John, who never grew taller than 5ft 5in and wore elevator shoes, was "embarrassed" by his height, believing it "marked him for failure."

"John was quite short, with somewhat delicate features, but no hint of the effeminate," says Osmond Molarsky, who served with him in the Navy during World War II. "Still, it was a major source of disesteem for him, if you knew him. No one else gave it a thought and women swarmed about him."[7]

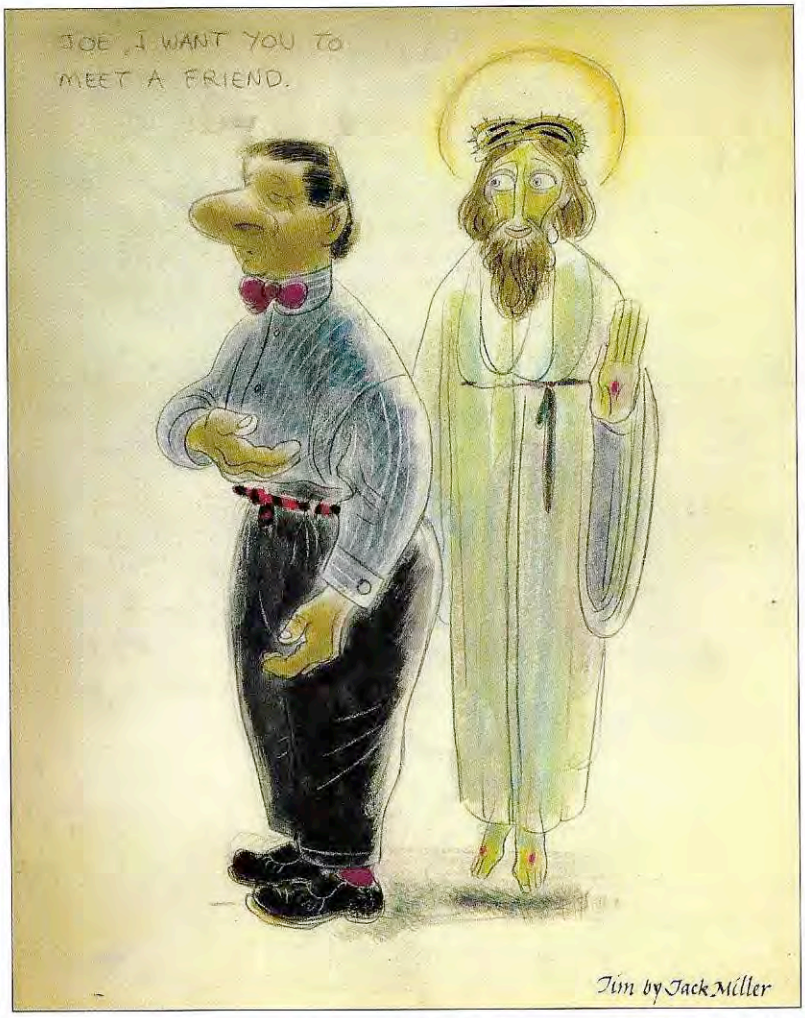
Indeed, as a handsome adult with wavy brown hair and blue eyes, J.P.'s easy charm, sophistication and shy sex appeal led to romantic relationships with numerous women, and also a late and disastrous marriage.

"John was like catnip to women," George Miller said. "They wanted to mother him and he was perfectly happy to let that happen."

To compensate for his lack of physical stature, J.P. early on took to the outdoor life with fierce dedication. When visiting his mother's relatives in Tamalpias in Marin County, California, he and brother James rose at dawn to duck hunt or climb mountains.

"Here's this mild-mannered guy wanting to be manly [with] all this hunting gear," George Miller recalled. "He'd have shotguns [and, in the late 1930s in Los Angeles], he'd go out weekends hunting with these Disney guys in the Mohave. He tied his own flies and was a good fly fisherman. He was a rock hound and would go into the desert and come back with a load of rocks. He used to go to the athletic club and punch punching bags. There was this whole thing about what it was to be male."

At times, the Miller children – James, Mary and John – found their parents' hard-scrabble backgrounds would become manifest in cruel child-rearing incidents. When, for example, the kids brought home a stray cat to keep as a pet without asking permission, Harry took the unfortunate animal upstairs and tossed it out a third story window.



Above: Caricature of Disney concept artists James Bodrero ("who claimed to know everyone") by Jack Miller, c. 1941. [Courtesy of Joe Grant.]

One time, while driving in rural Maine, John Parr's mother stopped the car so her five-year old son could relieve himself. When John couldn't obey her demand to urinate faster, she drove off without him and waited behind a bend in the road. After the child became duly hysterical, she returned to pick him up.

Despite this traumatic episode, John adored his mother, as did his two siblings. She was, according to John's niece Mary Miller, "very gentle and mild-mannered and loving." John often recalled with great warmth how his mother once hid a music box while it was playing under the bed in his room. "When the three children woke up, they could hear it and searched until it was eventually found." John loved the music box all his life and kept it all his life.

The children were devastated when their mother died in 1927 from blood poisoning, the result of catching her hand in a washing machine mangle. The freak accident and death occurred when John was 14.

Harry soon remarried. On St. Patrick's Day 1928 at the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration in New York City ("The Little Church Around the Corner") he wed Evelyn Mary Whittle [1893–1965]. His new wife was the second eldest of six surviving children born into a blue-collar Irish neighborhood in the Bronx when that borough was mostly dairy farms.

Evelyn was an attractive and "tremendously ambitious" woman, according to her son George Miller. At age thirteen, she toiled in a sweatshop; later, at Metropolitan Life, she rose to the highest job a woman could attain at that time: secretary to vice president Harry James Miller.

"When his father remarried," notes Mary Miller, John Parr's niece, "problems arose between her and the children who all adored their beloved natural mother."[8] Harry's pre-adolescent daughter Mary Elizabeth was sent away to a strict Catholic school in western Pennsylvania and years later became a nun. "I suspect my mother didn't want a rival around the house," said George Miller. "She was very possessive."

"Mary Elizabeth sobbed and wanted to return home," said J.P.'s niece; and Harry, Jr. tried to convince his parents to allow his sister to return east. When he failed, he left home and moved to California to live with his natural mother's sister; later he graduated from Mount Tamalpais High School and went to work for Met Life in San Francisco.

Soon after the marriage, many of Harry's job responsibilities were lost in a corporate reorganization. He believed that his abrupt demotion was caused by nepotism. The loss of prestige and perks were a severe blow to his self-esteem. Listless and depressed, he drank heavily and resigned Met Life on 1 January 1929.

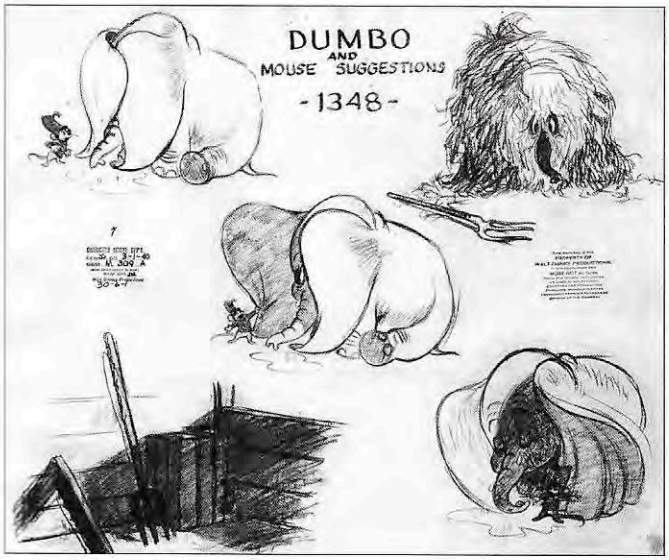
Above: Lee Blair shooting home movies in Peru, 1941. On location caricature by Jack Miller.

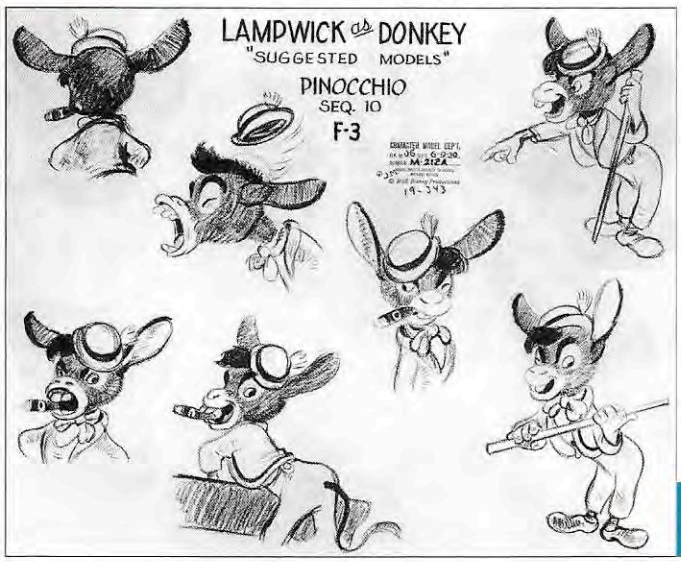
Below left: Dumbo *(1941) model sheet by Jack Miller.*
Below right: Lampwick from Pinocchio *(1940) model sheet by Jack Miller. [Both images, copyright The Walt Disney Company.]*

With the stock market crash and America's oncoming Depression, the Miller's eventually sold "that huge White Elephant of a house" in New Rochelle and moved with J.P. to a Bronxville apartment. The couple were comfortable financially and traveled; and on 12 November 1932 their son George was born.

But Harry was a stricken man who looked twenty years older than his 56 years. He died of pneumonia complicated by depression and alcohol abuse on 5 December 1933, the day Prohibition was repealed.

According to Mary Miller, her uncle John Parr was also, like his sister, supposed to be sent off





to a Catholic school. "But someone noticed his drawings and he was accepted in art school."

In a 1991 interview with animation historian Michael Barrier, J.P. recalled that a "dispossessed Hungarian artist" who painted portraits of his parents "sold them on the [idea] that I had talent."[9]

"John was the only artist in the family," said George. "His talent began to emerge as a child, when he would build elaborate dioramas of Indian villages in the basement. Years later I remember seeing a miniature carving of a rainbow trout mounted on a plaque. I was surprised that such detail and cleanliness of execution could have been the work of a kid."[10]

Information about J.P. Miller's education is sketchy. He attended Blair Academy, a posh New Jersey prep school and, in the Barrier interview, said that he was "aimed at Princeton and wouldn't go." Instead, he claimed to have studied at New York's Art Student's League "and didn't learn anything."

The Walt Disney Archives notes that Miller attended Grand Central Art School in New York City for two and a half years. George Miller also remembers John Parr "making an off-handed remark about attending the now defunct Corcoran School of Art.' "

Nearly one year after his father's death, John Parr Miller was hired by the Disney studio in Hollywood. "When my father died," explained George Miller, his widow Evelyn "felt she'd lost much of the status that she'd struggled a lifetime to attain. California looked like a big open field where she could experience life in a different way." Soon after Harry's death, Evelyn moved to Los Angeles with her two-year old son George and 20-year old stepson John Parr.

"You can't imagine how nice Hollywood was before the war," George said recently. "Lots of open land between the towns and sunny

Above: Lee Blair sinking into Lake Titicaca (between Peru and Bolivia) while shooting home movies. On location caricature by Jack Miller.

Below: The Disney studio's Character Model department, celebrates Joe Grant's 31st birthday in 1939. Standing l. to r.: James Bordrero, Earl Hurd, unknown, Bill Jones, unknown, Duke Russell, Martin Provensen, Jack Miller, Helen Nerbovig, unknown, John Walbridge, and Bill Wallett; seated l. to r.: Campbell Grant (in blackface as Joe Grant's politically incorrect "slave"), Joe Grant, Albert Hurter, and Kay Nielsen. [Courtesy Joe Grant.]

golden light. During the Depression, we lived pretty well," thanks to savings from Harry's estate and the sale of the house back east.

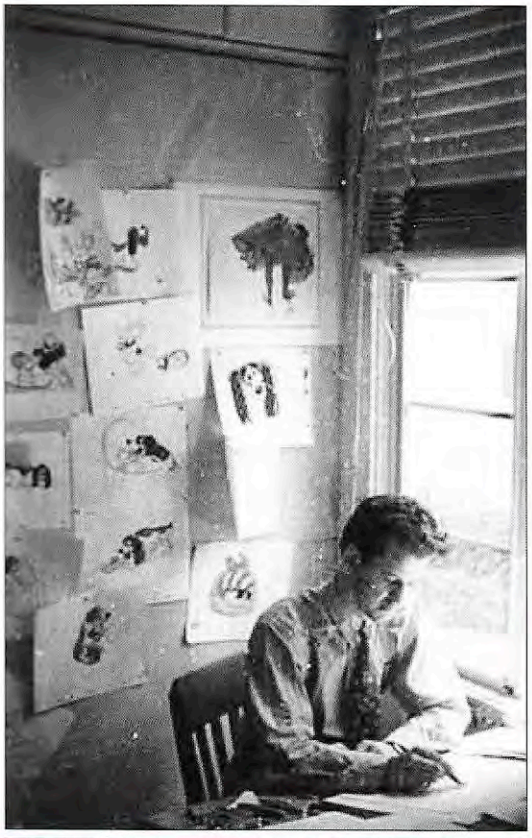
In LA, Evelyn's hats continued to be custom-made, and she bought opera singer Lauritz Melchior's Packard 120 (with twelve cylinders and jump seats for extra passengers). A petite woman, she needed plump cushions to see over the steering wheel.

At first, the little family rented bungalows between Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards. Later, in 1939, when John was making a more substantial salary and could contribute to the family's upkeep, they rented a spacious house on in the hills above the Sunset Strip, with night views of Hollywood spread out like a carpet of lights. To furnish it, Evelyn shipped out all her possessions from New York, including an ornate grandfather clock (one of Harry's Met Life perks) and thick oriental rugs.

Upon first arrival, and despite their comfortable circumstances, Evelyn insisted that shy, retiring John Parr get a job. She figured, explained her son George, that "he was done with his education, she'd always worked hard all her life, as had his father. Everybody they knew had a job, so time for him to get a job."

Miller once claimed an aunt of his in Pasadena "knew someone who was working at Disney's." So, off he went with his art school portfolio to see George Drake, who hired him on 10 December 1934.

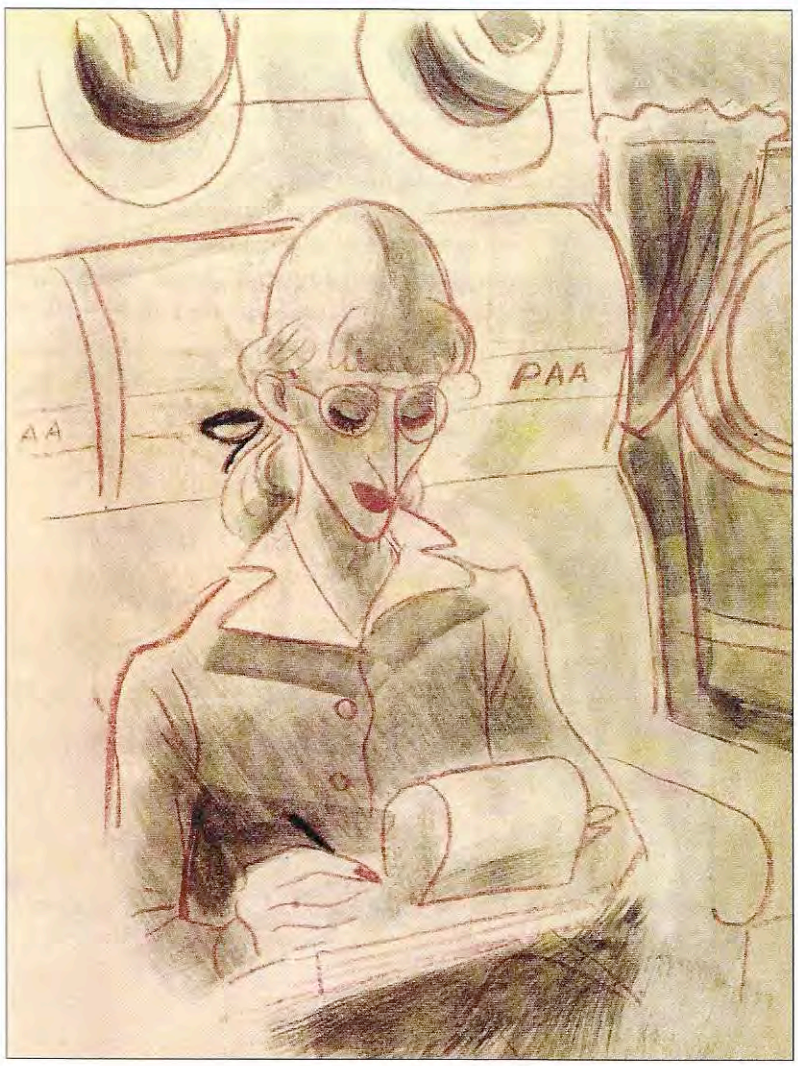
Drake was supervisor of the studio's "inbetween" department, one of the lowest ranks in the animation studio's hierarchy. A small army of "inbetweeners" drew sequential poses between the main drawings by the head animators, a tedious but necessary part of the studio assembly line.



Above: Jack Miller sketching in Mexico, 1941.

Below: Caricature of Mary Blair en route to South America, 1941, by Jack Miller.

Above left: Jack Miller at Disney's Hyperion Avenue studio in 1939 drawing character designs for Lady, which was finally produced in 1955 as Lady and the Tramp.



The department served as a "school" to indoctrinate newcomers into the craft of making-drawings-move. It also familiarized supervisors with new talent and suggested where they might best be utilized within the cartoon factory. Miller admitted to Michael Barrier that he never really learned how to do inbetweens. "They tried me and gave up," he said. "It was obvious that that wasn't my field."

But, "John had a talent that became visible," as George Miller put it. He was moved into the layout department briefly as an assistant. According to Walt Disney Archives records, however, Miller's initial years (after inbetweening) were spent in the story department.

Miller recalled working alongside Albert Hurter, the studio's top visual development (or "inspirational sketch") artist, "doing whatever he asked me to do . . . I think it might have been backgrounds and forests and creatures and so forth."

"Jack" Miller never wrote stories, and, as Joe Grant noted years later, he "was not in character creation. [Rather, he] was in character *design*." The distinction being that Miller freely explored the look of a story's characters, while development of a distinctive personality for those preliminary designs was determined by others: writers, comedy gag men, supervising artists (such as Grant), animators, and Walt Disney himself.

"In talking to Joe Grant," George Miller said, "my understanding of 'character creation' versus 'character design' was that character creation entailed imagining the character as a whole, such as his age, occupation, quirks, virtues and vices, persona, et cetera. Thus providing a verbal model for both writers and artists. Character design meant determining

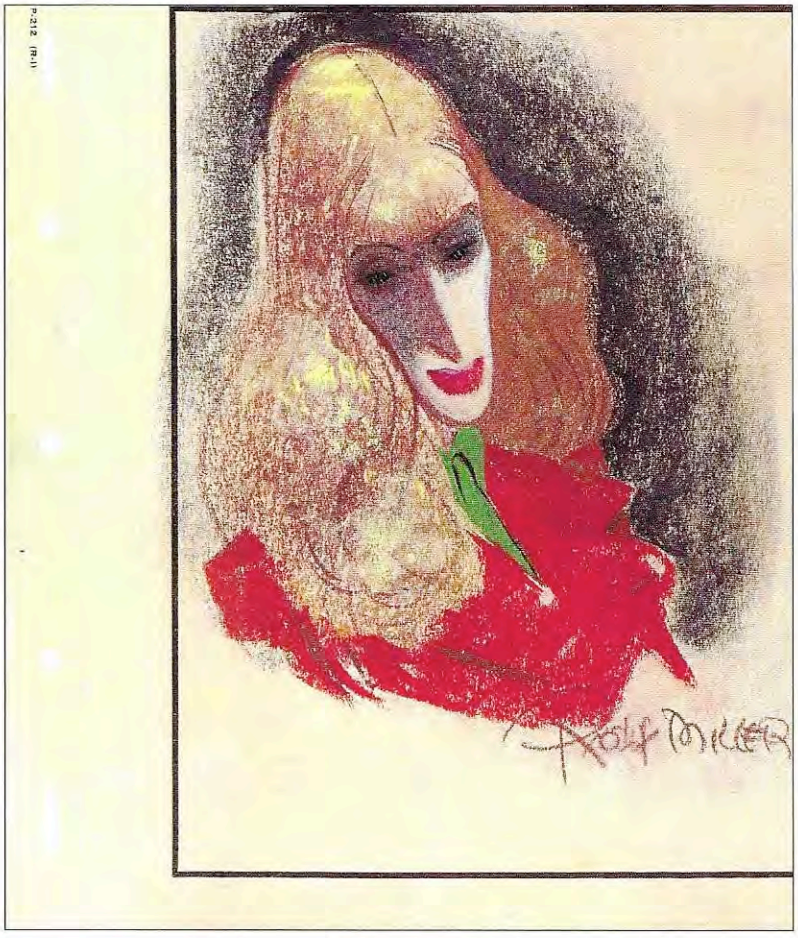
specifically what he actually looks like in the round, like the Geppetto model; developed by John – starting with the face of a co-worker [voice actor Christian Rub] and ending up with a stooped, white-haired man in apron and knee socks, and with arthritic knees."

On 11 October 1937, as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) neared completion, Miller was moved to the newly formed Character Model Department. He was one of the area's three initial employees, including supervisor/story man Joe Grant and puppet maker Bob Jones.

Grant quickly assembled a first-rate team of graphic artists and craftsmen and women, who at one time or another included Albert Hurter, James Bodrero, Kay Nielsen, Aurelius Battaglia, Mary Blair, and Martin Provensen, among others. Miller's friendship with the latter three artists would continue years later on the east coast when each were illustrating children's books.

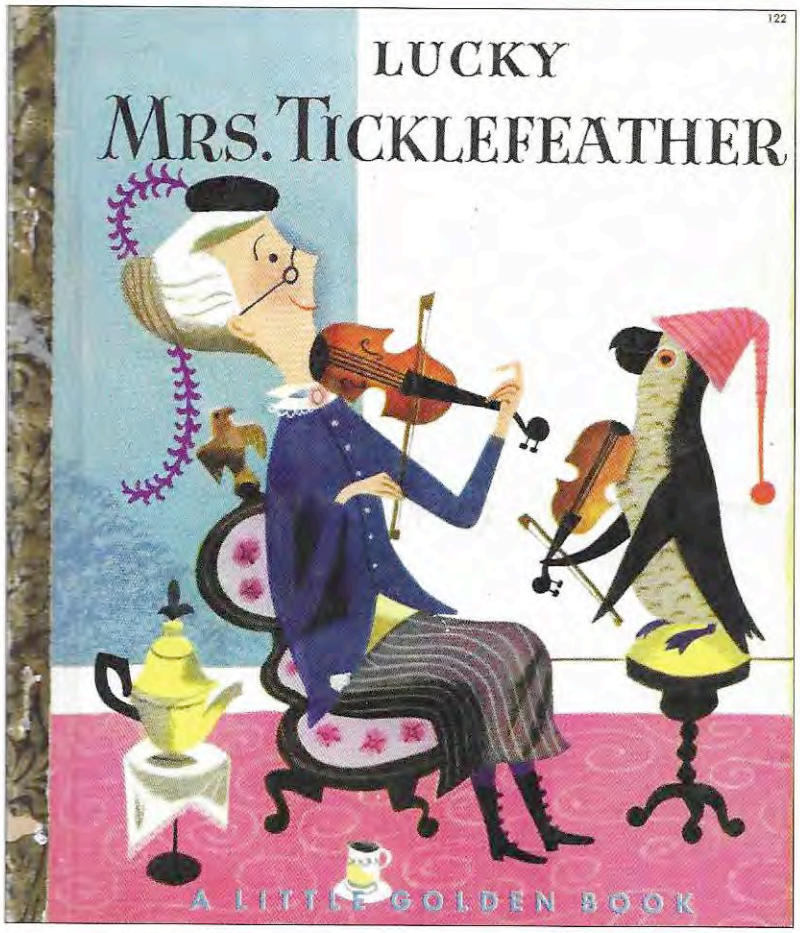
Walt Disney used the Character Model Department as a "brain trust," Grant said. "We'd have a board full of ideas. He'd pick something, enlarge on it. Come back two or three times a day to discuss it."

Miller was versatile: a sculptor as well as a graphic designer. "John had a really solid academic art training," commented George Miller. "I remember a classical [sculpture] of a kneeling nude woman that was spectacular." Sometimes co-workers would arrive at Jack's house of an evening to carve characters out of basewood. "The next morning the living room was this deep in wood carvings and here was a model of Toby the Tortoise."



Above: Caricature of Mary Blair in South America by Jack Miller.
Left: Caricature of Mary Blair in Peru, by Jack Miller.
Below: Jack Miller, Mary and Lee Blair, Herb Ryman, and Frank Thomas in South America, 1941.

Miller became good friends with Joe Grant and his family, sometimes staying at their home and firing *Fantasia* models in Grant's kiln, such as a triceratops for the Rite of Spring sequence. Miller always came laden with gifts, mostly for Grant's child Carol. His rapport with children was sincere and easygoing – his letters containing charming, humorous word play and doodles, and the toys he purchased through the years, are fondly remembered to this day by Grant's daughter,



throughout "Walt Disney's Honest John and Giddy," a 1940 Random House book;" "Pastoral from Walt Disney's Fantasia," a 1940 Harper & Brothers book; and "Baby Weems," a 1941 Doubleday book by Joe Grant and Dick Huemer based on the film short.

Years later, Miller recalled his Disney studio experience with ambivalence. On the one hand, he said in 1991, it "was all so new and casual and easy at Disney's." Drawing models "was just play" with "not a bit of pressure." The Character Model Department artists were "theoretically freer" than the animators were allowed to be. "It was a very nice place to work. There was never any unpleasantness that I can recall."

Privately, however, he often told his family and friends that he "really despised" working at Disney. "He hated every minute he was there," confirmed George Miller. "At home, in the early [inbetweening] days he was always bringing work home from the office. He was always drawing Mickey Mouse."

Later, hoping for "a way out," he drew spec covers for *Fortune* magazine and spec ad campaigns for Coca Cola When kid brother George would ask him about his work at

Miller's niece Mary, and the sons and daughters of several friends, such as illustrator Richard Scarry.

At Disney, Miller's best ideas for character designs and action poses were cut out and pasted onto preliminary "model sheets;" such as the early visualizations of village children in *Pinocchio*, Olympian gods in *Fantasia*, or clowns and animals in *Dumbo*.

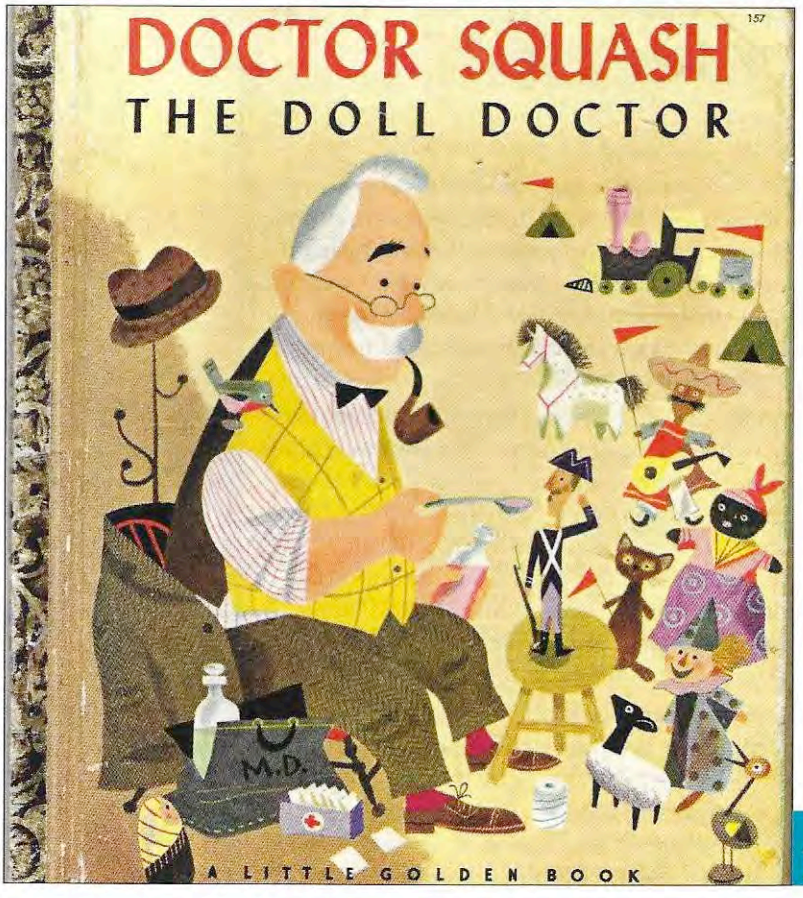
Miller's work was admired by many at Disney, including the resident art instructor Donald W. Graham (1903–1976). According to Vance Gerry (1929–2005) – a storyman of a later generation who considered Miller his "favorite story artist" and collected his model sheets – Graham was "high on Miller's work [which had an] incredible simplicity [of design]."[11]

In the late 1930s, Grant's department explored projects that reached the screen several years later. Miller brought his imaginative, appealing touch to swamp critters for "Uncle Remus" (later titled *Song of the South*, 1946), animals and caricatured humans in "Wind in the Willows" (*The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad*, 1948), and suburban dogs in "Lady" (*Lady and the Tramp*, 1955).

In a way, Miller's book illustration career began at Disney. His character sketches can be found in sections of Deems Taylor's 1940 book "Walt Disney's Fantasia;" in "Walt Disney's Surprise Package, a 1944 storybook;

Above: "Lucky Mrs. Ticklefeather," a 1951 Golden Book illustrated by J.P. Miller. [Copyright 1951 by Simon and Schuster Inc. and Artists and Writers Guild Inc.]

Below: "Doctor Squash The Doll Doctor," a 1952 Golden Book illustrated by J.P. Miller. [Copyright 1952 by Simon and Schuster Inc. and Artists and Writers Guild Inc.]



Right: Jack Miller's 1941 painting of a trolley conductor taking a break on a bench in Rio de Janeiro.

Disney, Jack often brushed him off with "It's all crap!"

Years later, Miller referred to the Character Model Department as "remote" and "sort of a goldbricking department," used as a showplace for prominent visitors to the studio. "I don't think it was a terribly necessary department," he said. "It's a good thing it didn't last any longer than it did."

Socially, Jack Miller's life was sweet. Often, he and several Disney colleagues, such as Lee and Mary Blair, storyman Dun Roman, or Martin Provensen, among others, would pile into cars, drive to Santa Monica to set bonfires and enjoy a beach party dinner. "That was a nice frequent thing," recalled George Miller who often joined them, "and, for me as a kid, very magical."

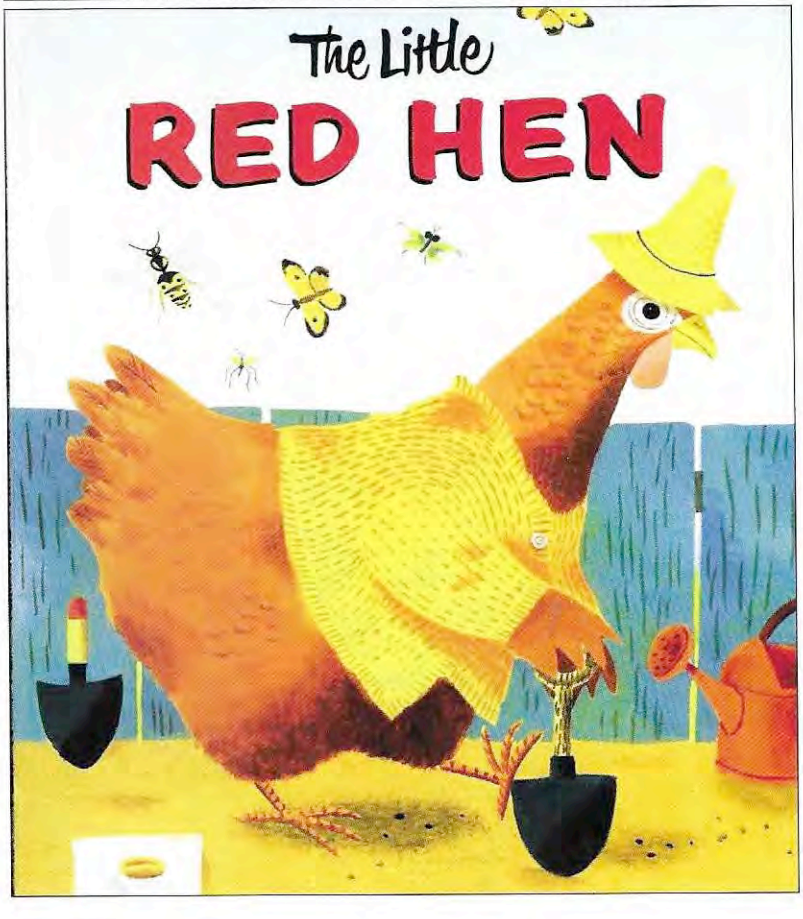
George also recalled the large amounts of alcohol consumed by Jack and his friends. "When the [Disney] gang came over to the house, my mother always had one tour de force: Lobster Newberg," he said. "There was this extended cocktail hour, raucous laughter before dinner was served." John drank "as much as anybody, but not in later life. He liked to drink with people, but was never an alcoholic."

Miller's salary at Disney by 1940 was about $5,000 a year; a comfortable wage in a day when a police patrolmen supported a family on half that amount. "My guess," said George Miller, "is that a Depression era $5,000 would be about $100,000 in today's purchasing power. Not bad for a guy in his 20s."

In 1938, he also came into a substantial share of the family inheritance. His stepmother kept it from him until he became 25 thinking he would save it wisely. "You know what happened?" she once asked her son George. "He jumped on an airplane and went to New York and spent it all!"

Miller's brief, expensive fling in New York may have been a manifestation of his wish to escape from the Disney studio – *and* his stepmother. Evelyn was apparently "very possessive" of her stepson, as well as her own son, and she displayed extreme "bitterness" toward certain of John's friends, such as Mary Blair. Often, recalled George Miller, she would "try to poison my mind against John."

But John Parr would also confide in his stepmother about his neurotic belief that his



Right: "The Little Red Hen," one of the most popular Golden Books ever. Illustrated in 1954 by J.P. Miller. [Copyright 1954, renewed 1982 by Random House, Inc.]

diminutive height "marked him for failure." After going to bed, his young brother George overheard "noisy conversations" between Evelyn and John, who would often moan: "I've got no character. You know I'm going to be a failure!"

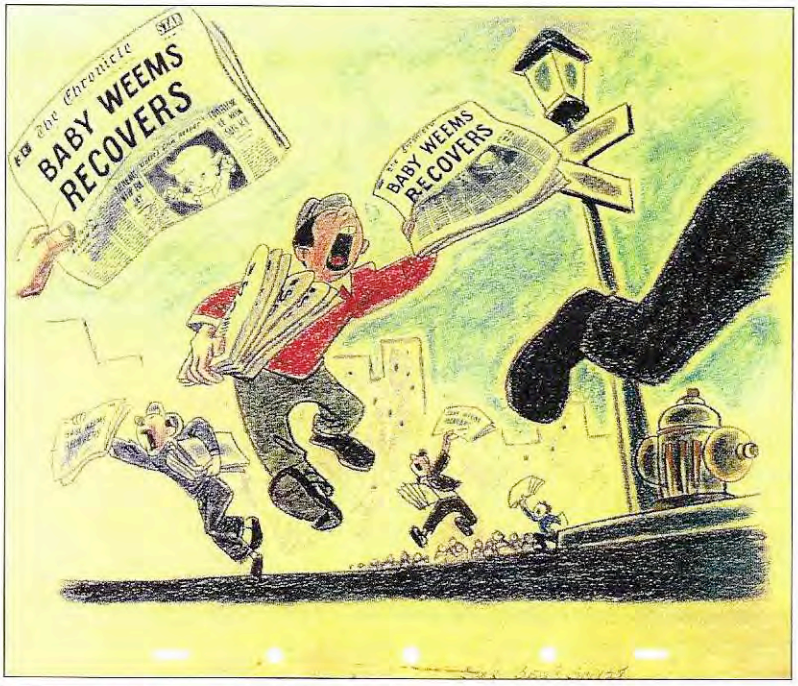
Except in formal meetings, Miller had little contact with Walt Disney. He told Michael Barrier that Disney was "very good about the people who worked for him," although frequently "abrupt." Disney would "sometimes listen to a story [pitch from] a director going through the whole process, and then he would simply step out of the room without saying a word."

Miller's mother once commented on "how indulgent Disney was of John." As an example, she noted that Disney once walked into Miller's office to find him lying on the floor resting and didn't fire him.

On the other hand, Osmond Molarsky, who worked with Miller on Navy training films during World War II, recently recalled that Miller said he "despised Disney personally and deplored his art."[12]

During the 1941 research trip to South American, several artists bonded with each other and with Walt; however, Miller's dislike of the boss seems to have intensified. He scoffed, for example, when Walt allegedly sketched Mickey Mouse or Goofy free-hand for an audience of children in Rio de Janeiro.

"John said, 'We'd always sketch in the picture lightly in pencil first,'" in order to make Disney look like "a big shot," recalls George Miller. No doubt his brother's social snobbery played a part in his opinion of Walt, whom he considered "a vulgarian."



Above: "School Children" from Pinocchio, a 1939 model sheet by Jack Miller. [Copyright The Walt Disney Company.]

Lower: Original art of newsboys from "Baby Weems" by Jack Miller. [Copyright The Walt Disney Company.]

Left: John Parr Miller as a child, c. 1916.

Miller may have been affected by observing Disney's petulant behavior during the acrimonious employee's strike that lasted from May through December 1941. Miller, however, did not participate in the strike. During its height, he was, in fact, with Walt and eighteen others on a good will tour of South America.

The trip was part of the U.S. government's "Good Neighbor" policy, an attempt to keep Latin America from joining forces with Hitler and to open up new markets for American products (such as movies) whose revenue stream was severely cut off due to the war in Europe.

Miller spent nearly three months in South American locales, mostly in the company of designers Lee and Mary Blair. Indeed, he seemed downright smitten with the very married Mary Blair, a gifted designer, judging

Above: Original art of a crowded New York City bus from "Baby Weems" by Jack Miller. [Copyright The Walt Disney Company.]

by the numerous caricatures he drew of her throughout the trip.

Miller and others arrived in Rio de Janeiro on 15 August 1941. A first meeting with Walt and the entire group of eighteen (nicknamed "El Grupo") took place four days later at the Copacabana Hotel.

Days of lunches and nights of dinners and receptions at glamorous restaurants and casinos followed, interspersed with sketching and photographing of local sites and meetings with local artists, such as composer Heitor Villa Lobos.

On 8 September, El Grupo arrived in Buenos Aires for more of same. "Mainly we were wined and dined all over the place," said Frank Thomas, the group's only animator. "It was real hard to do any work."[13]

On 20 September, Miller, the Blairs and designer Herb Ryman split off from Walt and the rest of El Groupo and flew to La Paz, Bolivia. But first they were forced to lay over in Tucman, Argentina, on account of bad weather, according to a Disney report on the trip.

This was the first of a series of difficulties the four artists would encounter in obscure locations.[14]

On 23 September, the foursome motored to Lake Titicaca (a visit eventually developed into a Donald Duck story designed and color styled by both Mary Blair and Miller for the 1943 feature *Saludos Amigos*). The next day, they embarked on an all-night voyage on the steamer "Inca" across the famed lake to the Peruvian side. Documentary footage show four weary artists arriving bundled up in overcoats on a cold morning.

Below: An original storyboard for the "Baby Weems" sequence of The Reluctant Dragon. *Jack Miller's early story drawings are looser and contain less detail than the finished versions used in the film; compare the newsboy drawing (middle right) with the one used in the film (see the centre image on the previous page).*

There followed an all-day train trip to Cuzco, Peru, with subsequent visits to Inca ruins and sketching and photographing Market Day. On 28 September, they were off by train to Juliaca, Peru. Then on to Arepuipa where the Disney report notes that the four tired artists spent the day sketching "and resting after strenuous train trip from Juliaca."

On 2 October, they flew by Panagra plane to Lima for a scheduled tour of the city. But the little group was "laid up with colds and altitude fever acquired on the 'altiplano'."

After almost a week touring Lima, they flew to Quito, Equador, and stayed in private residences rather than a hotel. (Miller boarded at the Naval Attache's home.) For two days they sketched and photographed the Indian quarter, visited homes to observe pottery-making and native handcrafting, and attended a cocktail reception at the Ecadorian embassy; then flew to Christobal via Guayaquil and Balboa. By 13 October, they were in Guatamala City for four days – motoring to Chichicastenango via the ruins at Antigua, sketching and photographing all the way.

They arrived in Mexico City on 18 October and the next day attended a roping and horsemanship exhibition and a bullfight. Numerous receptions and conferences followed, plus a sketching visit to the Floating Gardens of Xochemilco, dinners with dignitaries, and visits to Mayan and Aztec art museums, before finally arriving exhausted back home in Burbank, California via Guadlajara, Mazatlan, Hermosillo, and Maxicali on 22 October.

Miller returned home laden with gifts from Mexico, recalls his kid brother. "Marvelous machetes, a skull exhumed from a cemetery, a marvelous chinchilla bed throw. And pre-Columbian statues."

For all his travels, though, Jack Miller seems to "have had relatively little involvement with the studio's Good Neighbor projects after that," according to historian J.B. Kaufman, who is writing a book on the Disney tour.[15] "The only Latin American film for which he received credit was *Saludos Amigos* and in that one he worked specifically on the Lake Titicaca [Donald Duck] segment.

"He and Mary Blair worked together on the initial story development of that one [during October and November 1941]." Their collaborators were Homer Brightman and Roy Williams, two rough-and-tumble story and gag men who did not go on the South American jaunt, but who provided the segment's predominantly slapstick comedy; Blair and Miller contributed ideas for the segment's appealing color styling and details based on their on-site research.

According to a budget sheet, Miller and Blair may also have supervised as well as painted some of the backgrounds for the Lake Titicaca sequence. Miller also toiled in the spring of 1942 for weeks on a storyboard for "The Lady with the Red Pompom," a musical number with South American birds and Donald Duck that was never produced.

On 19 June 1942, Jack Miller quit the Disney studio and joined the Navy.

To be continued in the next issue of *CARTOONS*.

Notes

1. Chuck Jones interview by Michael Barrier. Funnyworld #13, 1971.
2. Ibid
3. Walt Disney's Treasures DVD: Behind the Scenes at the Walt Disney Studio: "Behind the Boards On Baby Weems."
4. *New York Times* obit, 29 November 2004.
5. Unless otherwise attributed, quotes are from an interview by this author with George E. Miller on 15 November 2005 in Manhassett, N.Y.
6. George Miller e-mail to JC, 12 July 2006.
7. Letter from Osmond Molarski to JC, 19 December 2005.
8. Mary Miller e-mail to JC, 1 August 2006.
9. J.P. Miller to Michael Barrier, 6 October 1991.
10. George Miller, 12 July 2006 email to JC.
11. Vance Gerry to JC, 26 July 1995.
12. Letter to George Miller from O.M., 1 September 2001.
13. Frank Thomas to Bob Thomas, 10 May 1973.
14. "Itinerary – 6 August – 22 October 1941." Collection John Canemaker.
15. J.B. Kaufman email to JC, 21 November 2005.

John Canemaker *is an animator, the author of ten books on animation history, and a full professor and the Executive Director of the Animation program at NYU Tisch School of the Arts Kanbar Institute of Film & Television.*
His animated short The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation *won an Oscar in 2006.*

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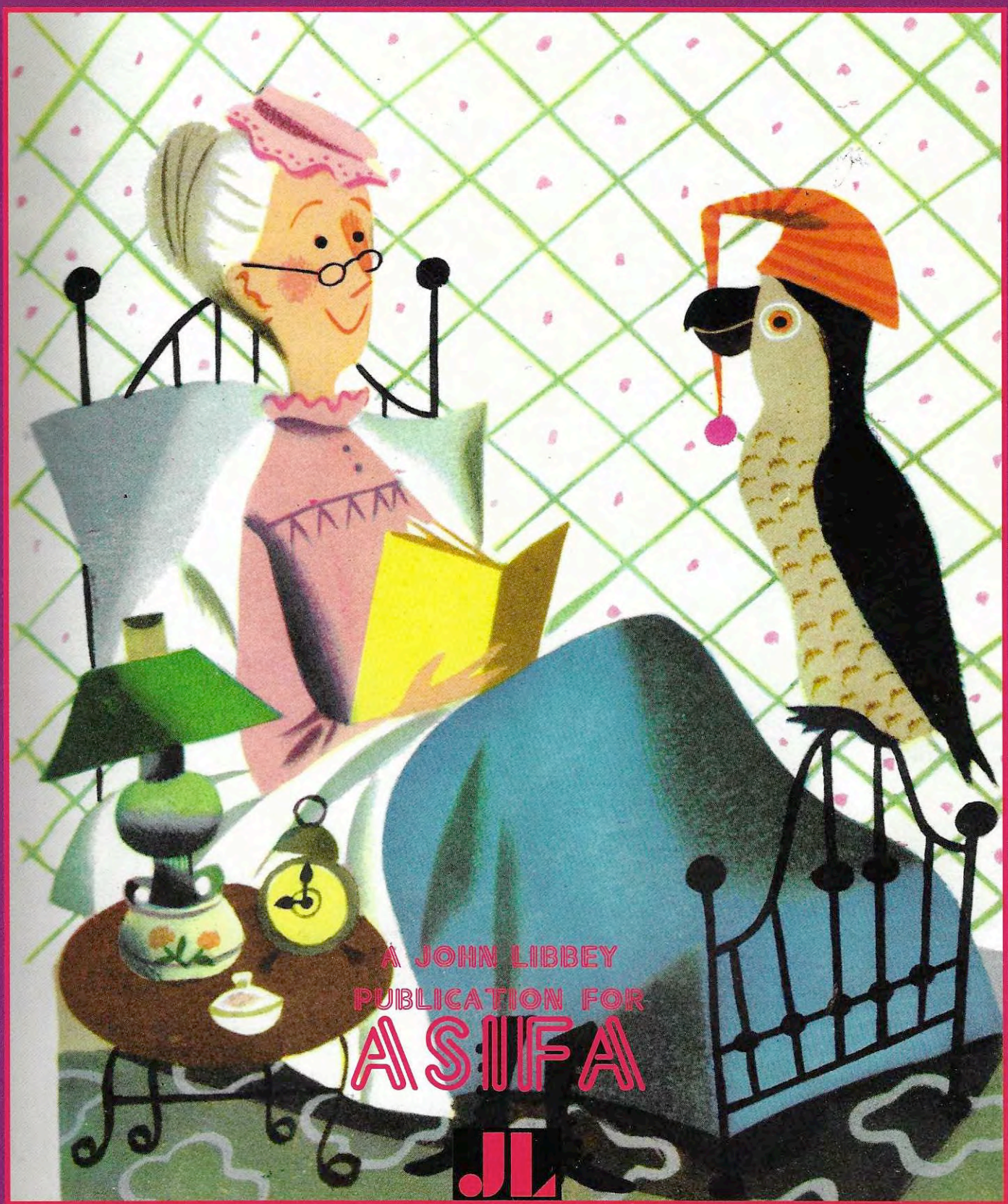

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In Search of John Parr Miller: 2

by John Canemaker

On a bright December day in 2006, Margot Bachman sipped tea and looked out a tall window in her elegant Manhattan apartment. Across the street, horse-drawn, tourist-laden carriages lined up to enter Central Park's south side.

Petite, dressed chicly in black, and nearing ninety years of age with her mobility and lively wit intact, she recalled first meeting J.P. Miller.

"I met John Miller on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 11th Street sometime in the early fifties", she said. At that time she was Margot Macdonald from Ontario, a vivacious young editor at *Seventeen* magazine and later *Woman's Day*.[1]

She was on a date when the man she was with noticed another couple walking toward them.

Below: Photographed in South America: (l to r) Disney publicist Janet Martin, artists Lee Blair, herb Ryman, and J.P. (Jack) Miller.

He recognized the woman as an old acquaintance and they promptly "fell into each other's arms". Bachman idly chatted with the acquaintance's date, who happened to be Miller. While they stood on the street corner, Miller surprised her by offering a martini and whipped from a bag two cocktail glasses and a flask.

"Obviously, he and his girlfriend were going somewhere and told to bring their own drink", Bachman said, laughing at the memory. The couples parted before she and Miller had a chance to sip martinis *al fresco*; but the next day he phoned her to suggest they meet at the Plaza Hotel for that drink. "I never knew how he found my name or where I worked, but that was the beginning of a great friendship."

They became romantically involved for a time. "And then that ended", she said. "And we

became fast friends forever. Probably my best friend and I was his best friend."

When they met, Miller was in his late thirties, about five years past his Navy war service and even further away from his tenure (from 1934 to 1942) as a top Walt Disney Studio character designer. He was well into the field he entered in 1947 and remained in for the rest of his long life under the name "J.P. Miller": children's book illustrator extraordinaire.[2]

At the time, Miller was enjoying a lively New York City social life, according to Bachman, "a life of many friends, all of them bright, all of them fun. Many witty because he was witty. And he liked witty people."

People liked Miller; and some loved him. "Yes, he had lots of girlfriends", Bachman admitted. "Which was one of the reasons we didn't get married, 'cause I thought he'd be the most unfaithful husband in the world." Marriage, when it finally came late in his life, would prove disastrous, though ironically not because of Miller's lack of fidelity.

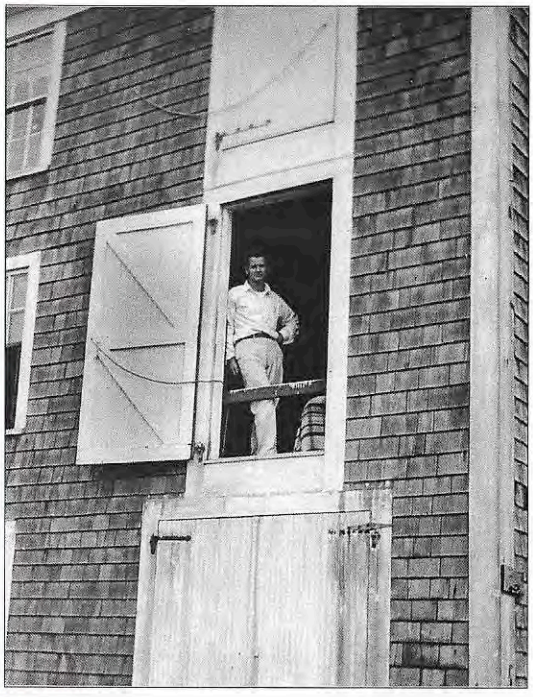
Though outwardly cheerful and mild, Bachman noted that "inside, he was a deeply angry man" with "an ambivalent relationship with his work. He was deeply involved in it, but never seemed to feel it was good enough."

Stories abound about Miller's anxious perfectionism – a diligence that defied deadlines, necessitated all-night work sessions, and forced harried art directors and publishers to physically wrest art work from the artist.

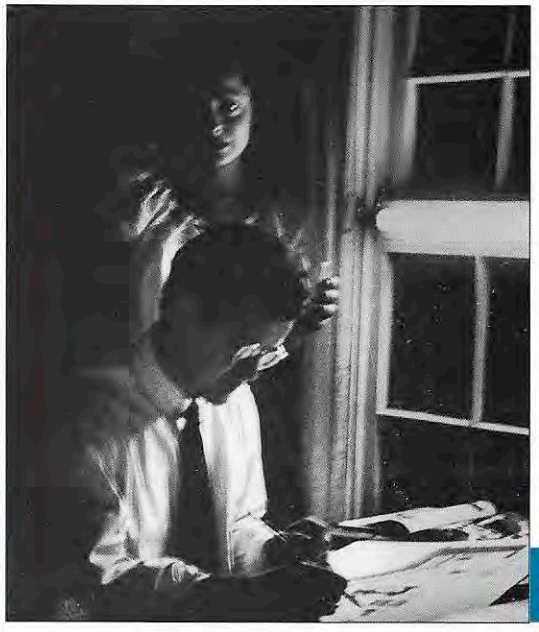
Miller was also neurotically distressed about his short stature (5', 5"), though "he was quite flawlessly turned out", according to Osmond Molarski, a writer who worked with Miller in the Navy. In an unpublished *roman à clef* about the artist, Molarski described his surrogate for Miller as "a scaled-down David, with his mother's high forehead, straight nose and well-sculpted chin, erect carriage, thick, curly brown hair and soft modulated speech, a trifle gruff at times but admirably suited to telling droll stories and delivering sly quips. All of this and a sweet disposition, though clearly troubled."[3]

Early on during World War II, Miller enlisted in the Navy (on 29 June 1942) and served three and 1/2 years, mustering out on 5 January 1946 as a Chief Specialist. He served at the film unit at Anacostia Naval Station in Washington, D.C. where secret reconnaissance and tactical planning films were made especially for the Pacific theatre. His stateside tour of duty was "not bad", noted his half-brother George E. Miller, "considering that during the war women outnumbered men about three to one".[4]

Above: J.P. Miller (left) and James Bodrero admire a sculpture in South America.



Right: J.P. Miller in a Connecticut barn, circa 1950s.



Right: Margot Macdonald Bachman and J.P. Miller, c. 1950s.

Above: J.P. Miller paints a horse on illustrator Richard Scarry's Ridgefield, Connecticut barn, c. 1952.

Below: (l to r) George Miller (J.P.'s half brother), J.P. Miller, animator Willis Pyle, and Deborah Miller (George's wife), circa 2003.

As a chief petty officer, John Miller looked handsome in a double-breasted suit and peaked cap. According to George Miller, John never had to go through boot camp and was "not very military." Early on, he was ordered to drill recruits, which proved "a disaster".

"John would rather have been shot at sunrise than participate in any such goings-on", Molarsky said in a 2005 letter. Miller managed to be out-of-town on drill days. The image of the diminutive officer in a visor cap ordering sailors about was "ludicrous", recalled Molarsky. "Only someone who knew him can appreciate the humor and the pain of this situation."[5]

In the Navy, Molarsky wrote and Miller designed "a limited animation film to be done entirely in cutout colored paper". Titled "Perils of Liberty in the Orient", it was not a political tract, "but referr[ed] to shore leave". The war, however, "ended before we got very far into it, but the cutouts are interesting".[6]

The training film's restrictive movement was to be similar to the "Baby Weems" animation in Disney's feature *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941), for which Miller designed characters and settings. Molarsky thought the *Dragon* drawings "very droll", but because Miller "despised everything about Disney", the Navy film graphics were very different.

Miller's decision not to return to California but to head to the east coast after the war "bitterly disappointed" his possessive stepmother, said his brother George. Returning to the Disney studio, of course, "was never a consideration".[7]

The Navy cut-out film project was a transition in Miller's evolving drawing style – from detailed caricatures in line defining Disney-esque volumes and space, to flat silhouetted characters in spaces that play with two and three-dimensionality.

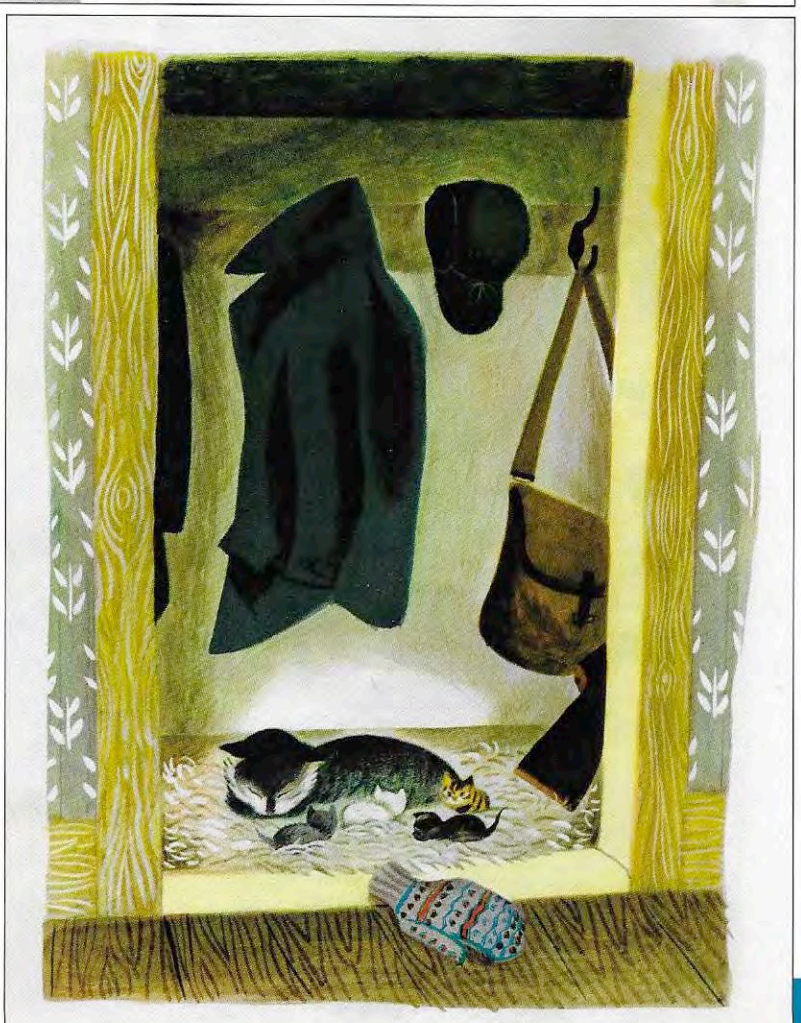
The latter style can already be seen in his initial foray into children's book illustration:

Margaret Wise Brown's "Wonderful Story Book", published in 1948 by Simon and Schuster.

A folk art feel prevails in Miller's colorful, charming illustrations in "Wonderful Story Book;" which are painted with a technical sophistication and awareness of their effect beyond naive or outsider art.

"There's this tremendous attention to detail [in Miller's work] and handled in an effortless way", observed Leonard S. Marcus, author of a history of Golden Books ("*Golden Legacy*", Random House, 2007). "And [Miller] moves between two-and three-dimensional representation. So that you're in this kind of warped world, which exists only in the imagination of the receptive viewer and the artist who created it. He's created another dimension, really."[8]

In "Wonderful Story Book", for example, a painting of a cat with newborn kittens in a clothes closet is flat, but shaded to lend dimensional form and believability. A meticulously patterned glove with a small

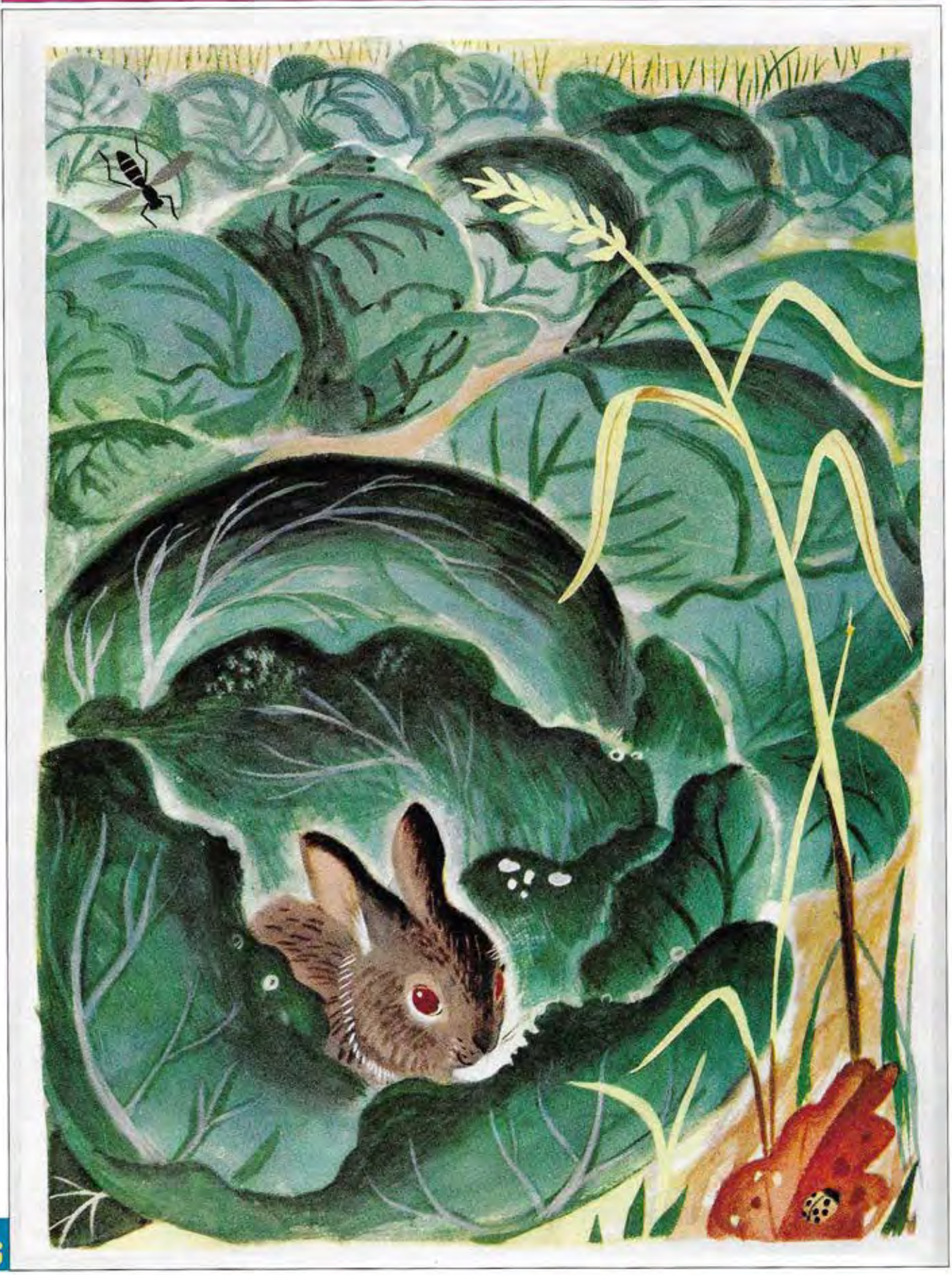


Above: A double spread illustration by J.P. Miller from "Dr. Squash the Doll Doctor" written by Margaret Wise Brown.

Right: A family of cats from J.P. Miller's first illustrated Big Golden Book "Margaret Wise Brown's Wonderful Story Book".

Both images © Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1948.

Below:
A bunny in the cabbage patch from "Margaret Wise Brown's Wonderful Story Book".
[Copyright Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1948.]



shadow underneath adds depth and perspective to the overall design. It lies across the threshold between the cats and the wooden floor outside the closet in which hang an overcoat, cap, and satchel resembling cut-out abstract shapes.

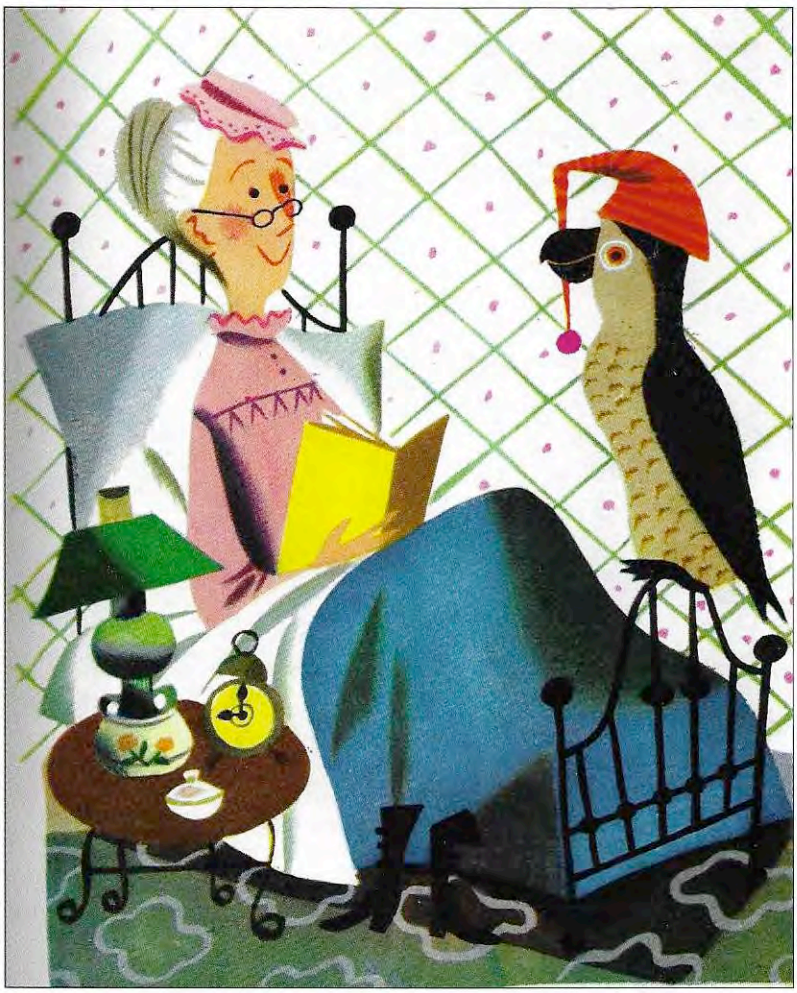
Miller's modernist style fits right in with the dominant illustration mode at Golden Books, his main employer. Their artists, Marcus believes, depicted abstract things related to sensory experience, trying to "capture the child's felt perception of the world as much as they are trying to show the things of the world".

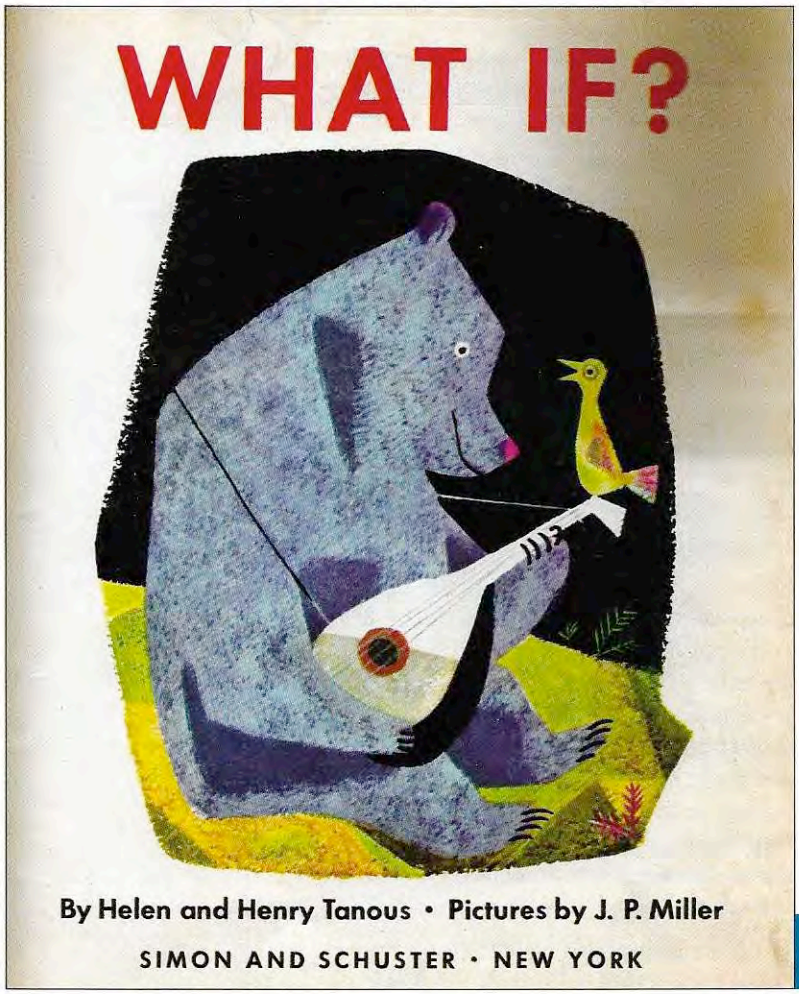
"As diverse as the [Golden Book] illustrators were in style and technique", wrote Barbara Bader in "*American Picture Books from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*" (McMillan Publishing Co., N.Y., 1976) "they tend to adopt a common approach, emphasizing, even exaggerating, the crucial action or emotion, minimizing or eliminating incidental detail, flattening the picture space – all in the service of compression, of a clear-cut forceful statement".[9]

Miller's career in children's books may have begun through friends already established in the field, most likely Martin Provensen, Miller's colleague at the Disney Character Model Department, and his wife Alice. Gustaf Tenggren, famed illustrator and former Disney designer, brought the Provensens to Golden Books' attention and they may have done the same for J.P. "He was very social", said Marcus of Miller, "so there would have been lots of discussion about where the work was. And Western [publisher of Golden Books] was generating a lot of work."

Miller was certainly the right person in the right art form at the right time. The Golden Books series – which began as a partnership venture of the Artists and Writers Guild (the New York-based packaging arm of Western Printing and Lithographing Company of Racine, WI), and Simon and Schuster – became immediately popular when launched in October 1942.

50,000 copies were printed of each of the first twelve titles; within five months (and a third printing), more than 1.5 million books had been sold. The books were affordable and accessible. At a time when most kid's books were luxury items priced between $2.00 and





Above: A "very thin old lady" and her beloved puffin Paul, illustration by J.P. Miller from "Lucky Mrs. Ticklefeather" by Dorothy Kunhardt.
[Copyright Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1951.]

Below: A banjo-playing blue bear from "What If?" by Helen and Henry Tanous, illustrated by J.P. Miller.
[Copyright Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1951.]

Authors and Artist

Helen and Henry Tanous live in Burbank, California, where he is an artist with the Disney Studio. Besides caring for their three children, she designs wallpaper and fabrics and does magazine art.

J. P. Miller has designed films for Disney and, during World War II, for the Navy. He has illustrated THE WONDERFUL STORY BOOK, both the Big and Little GOLDEN FUNNY BOOKS, and several other Little Golden Books.

$3.00, Golden Books sold for .25 cents. And thanks to an aggressive Simon and Schuster sales staff, they sold in supermarkets and drugstores as well as bookstores.

An easy-to-hold size for small hands and sturdy side-staple binding – plus colorful, broadly simple (often childlike) illustrations and simple, direct text – held enormous appeal for kids and parents alike. Golden Books was "an attempt to make better books available to every child", said George M. Nicholson, who once worked for Artists and Writers Guild and later popularized high-quality paperback publishing for young people in the USA. "They were child-oriented, brightly packaged, very cheap, and they were everywhere."[10]

Librarians hated them. The library world, centralized with the New York Public Library as it's power base, believed that books were the child's first exposure to the world of fine art. Hence, pictures books should be aesthetically uplifting experiences for children and made in a certain way: oversized, cloth bound, on high quality paper. Illustrations could be charming, but strongly representational with dimensionally-modeled animals and people that mirror real life.

The librarians judged Golden Books to be "mass production, a Ford assembly line applied to art for children", said Marcus. Golden Book pictures were (as noted) for the most part decidedly less than literal in portraying the world. Most displayed a modernist twinge, descriptively influenced by folk art and Cubism.

Above: A highly stylized rooster from "What If?" [Copyright Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1951.]

J.P. Miller, who was "an avid admirer of Matisse", said George Miller, believed that applying Matisse's simplified shapes, patterns and flattened space to his illustrations "could raise the level of public sophistication as well as connect with the way that children experience the world".[11]

The librarians wrote book reviews and annual lists of the "best" children's books; and conferred awards and prizes that influenced sales to libraries and schools around the country. "It had a lot to do with whether a book succeeded or not in the long run", Marcus said. Golden Books were seldom praised or prized.

But their worst offense was the undermining of the librarians' political power because Golden Books went directly to the public. "So what the librarians said in their reviews about these books didn't make any difference", said Marcus. "They were being cut out of the critical process. And they saw themselves as having a selfless responsibility to look after the better interests of America's children. So they got very angry."[12]

No matter. The public loved Golden Books and their stories and artists. By 1953, 300 million Little Golden Books had been sold. Miller's work, which grew in popularity in the late forties and throughout the fifties, demonstrates an ineffable whimsy and adventurous color/design choices.

Memorable is his mandolin-playing blue bear on the title page of "What If?" (Golden Books, 1951, written by Helen and Henry Tanous), all sharp angles strikingly silhouetted against a black background. Turn the page and you're greeted by a Picasso-esque yellow and grey rooster with flaming orange aura set against a brown background. A similarly primitive quality is found on the last page: a yellow cheetah with brown spots against an oval mocha-colored background with white grass patterning. Folk art that Miller studied during his 1941 Mexico trip for Disney may have inspired it.

Some of Miller's most highly patterned and amusing illustrations are found in "Lucky Mrs. Ticklefeather" (1951, written by Dorothy Kunhardt) and "Doctor Squash The Doll Doctor" (1952, written by Margaret Wise Brown). The eccentrically named Mrs. T, "a very thin old lady with a good sized feather in her hat", lives in an urban high-rise with a

large puffin named Paul who manages to become lost for a time.

The equally oddly-named doctor is an elderly, mustachioed, selfless general practitioner who administers to toys, until the day he falls ill. Then the dolls and toys nurse *him* back to health, swarming over the prostrate physician like Lilliputians on Gulliver.

In both books, Miller creates a complete and utterly inviting world of gentle humor, visual inventiveness and (as befits his background) animation and movement. And, masterful designer that he was, his artworks are appealing and highly communicative – the deceptively simple imagery in singing colors could be easily understood if viewed from across a room.

In many paintings, Miller plays a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't game of scale and perspective with the child reader. In "The Musicians of Bremen" (1954), a farmer pitching hay in the distance is as large as his house, which is positioned on a middle level closer to the viewer. Animals on a third level are the proper size compared to their surroundings. The visual playfulness lends a child's-eye feel to the art making the settings appear toylike.

In "Bremen", Miller also conjures lovely color effects from moonlit scenes – of sleeping animals in and next to a black tree illuminated against a dark purple sky; or the boldest brigand walking, guns drawn, in and out of moonlight shadows.

It is not known if Miller directly influenced other illustrators of the period. But, in at least one instance, Campbell Grant (another former Disney Character Model Department staffer) seems to have admired Miller's work to the point of plagiarism. His model for the main character in the 1952 Golden Book "Walt Disney's Noah's Ark" is a dead ringer for Miller's design of Noah on page 28 in "The Little Golden Funny Book" published two years before – down to the color of Noah's red-violet robe, receding hairline above curly white locks and beard, and red pointed nose.

Because Miller joined Golden Books early on, his contracts held a perk that few of their artists and writers enjoyed: a royalty clause. "In those days", said George M. Nicholson, who is now a literary agent, "[Western Publishing] bought everything outright. Almost nobody got a royalty. Margaret Wise Brown did, but very few others."[13] Miller also drew advertisements and a few book illustrations for the adult market, such as one promoting vicuna apparel and another on Venezuelan recipes.

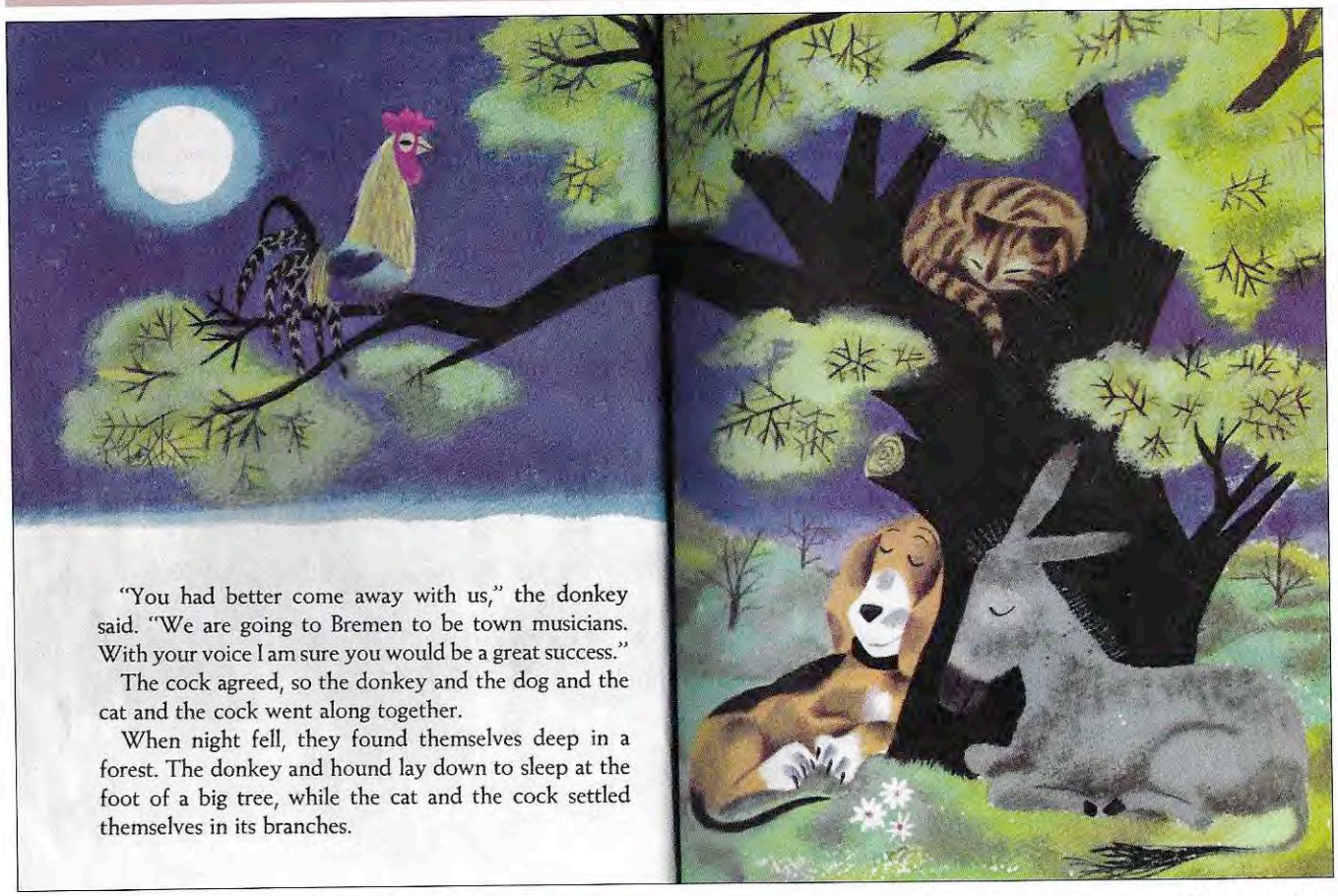
Although he agonized over each book assignment, never believing it was good enough to release without adding one more detail or color adjustment, he "loved what he was doing", said Bachman. He would "denigrate" the current project until it was published, but then he "did take pride in it".

Working steadily over the years, Miller's royalties accrued and J.P. enjoyed the social and intellectual stimulus of New York City. He lived comfortably in Manhattan in high style elegance, working in the living room of his small rental garden apartment on East 49th Street in New York's chic Turtle Bay Gardens. Katherine Hepburn's townhouse was across the street.

He was extravagant. His clothing, including his shoes, were custom-made. One day he might buy expensive Danish furniture, only to get rid of it soon after because it wasn't "quite right". One summer he rented a house in the Hamptons and didn't visit it at all.

He was in demand socially and generous with his friends. He usually picked up the check for the whole table at lunches and dinners. If a girlfriend was becoming possessive, he might brush her off with a fur coat. He brought lavish gifts when friends invited him for extended stays at their houses in Cape Cod, the Hamptons, Connecticut and the Caribbean, which they often did merely to delight in his company. He always brought

Below: A faux folk art cheetah from "What If?" [Copyright Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1951.]



"You had better come away with us," the donkey said. "We are going to Bremen to be town musicians. With your voice I am sure you would be a great success."

The cock agreed, so the donkey and the dog and the cat and the cock went along together.

When night fell, they found themselves deep in a forest. The donkey and hound lay down to sleep at the foot of a big tree, while the cat and the cock settled themselves in its branches.

Above: Four itinerant animal musicians sleep beneath a full moon. Illustration by J.P. Miller from "The Musicians of Bremen". [Copyright Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1954.]

illustration work with him, but socializing took precedence over deadlines.

When he settled in the east after the war, Miller spent what his kid brother George described as "a riotous year"(1947–48) in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He rented a sail loft on the water and a winterized floor-through waterfront apartment closer to town on Cook Street with a big kerosene space heater.

15-year old George from California visited his 35-year old brother that summer. "The amenities of his harbor-front apartment included a small sailboat he had bought for me, sailing lessons at a nearby wharf and a neighborhood kid as a sailing pal, who is now my oldest friend."[14]

George was "enthralled by the uniqueness and bizarre-ness of this [Provincetown]" and its artistic denizens. "Man, that was a hard-drinkin' bunch up there!" he recalled. "Most of the painters there were year-rounders. There was a drinking society and John was part of that." He was also "screwing everyone else's wife".

George remembered, however, one "really nifty 23-year-old" French-Canadian art student/au pair who threw herself at J.P. to no avail. Mysteriously, he kept her at arm's length, asking his little brother to row her around the harbor when she would come to visit. George was puzzled until he found out years later that the young woman's father personally warned J.P. to keep his hands off or else.

Why was J.P. Miller catnip to women? He has been described as "elfin", "small with a wonderful smile", essentially shy, "slightly forlorn" and "cuddly" (he put on weight in late middle age); he was also "a very funny man [with] a wonderful bemused way of looking at the world. A great observer."[15]

George Miller thinks he appealed to women's maternal instincts. "I think women just really wanted him", he said. "Basically, women would meet him and say he needs me, needs a mother."

"I introduced him to at least thee women [in the late 1940s]", recalled Osmond Molarsky, "who loved him and enriched his life. We should all be so lucky." One, a diminutive sportswoman who "was devoted to John", once said, "I've known more exciting men, but none so dear".

"He had that wonderful kind of personality that makes you always look forward to seeing him", said Margot Bachman. "He was fun, thoughtful, generous, witty and charming." Then she added, "Most of the time".

Although Miller "refused to have a child of his own, John really loved children", Bachman said. "He enjoyed being with them and they liked and reacted to him. It isn't that he played with them particularly. I think it was probably the way he talked to them."

When he died, many who knew Miller as children (including Joe Grant's daughter Carol and Richard Scarry's son Huck) described their love for him – how they looked forward to his visits; his funny illustrated letters that didn't talk down to them; his generous gift giving.

Miller's attitude toward adults varied widely on the charm scale. His privileged childhood gave him a strong sense of entitlement. "John was a snob", his brother explained. "He had difficulty with people he considered vulgar." His favorite expression was "lowest common denominator" which was applied to anything he didn't like, including people.

Bachman said she "had friends I would never dream of introducing John to" because he might consider them intellectually or socially inferior. "He'd take one look at them and that would be it. I always knew there were certain people that John should never meet." What kind? "Sort of proper insurance salesmen [types]. Often middle-Westerners with their Republican ideas." Which may be one reason he so disliked Walt Disney.

"He had a brilliant mind and an intellectual's library", said Bachman. But deep down he was unhappy and angry which, she speculates, may have stemmed from the trauma of his mother's tragic early death. Or dissatisfaction with his work. Or the state of the world in general. "He would be desolate over the [current] events in the United States", she noted.

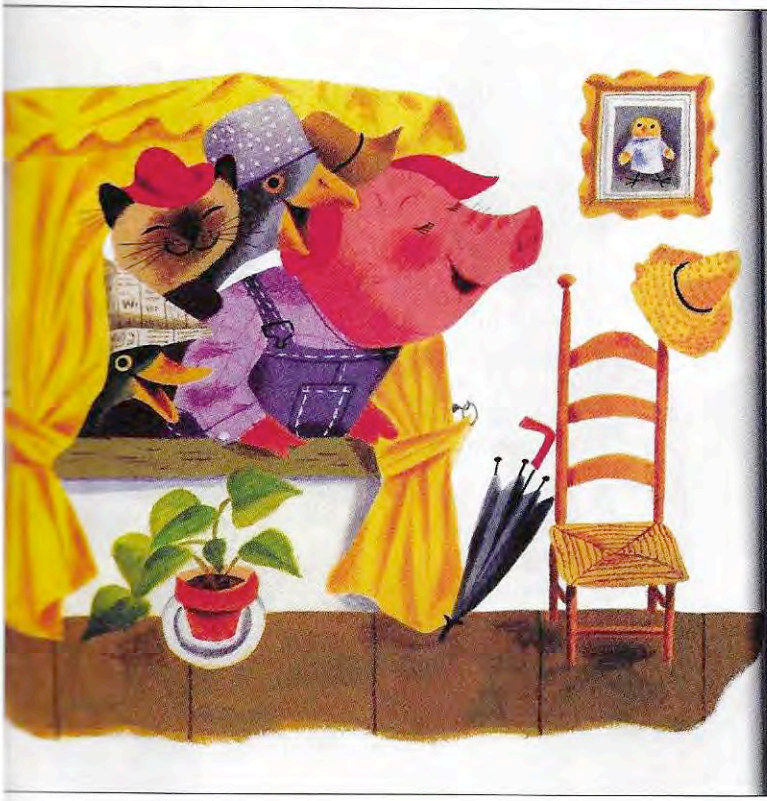
"John was a naïve person", said George Miller. "He felt things very deeply and was always reading philosophy. In his twenties, he thought he wanted to be a monk. He felt tormented because he wanted to be away from it all, be a holy man. His library was 20 per cent Zen writings."

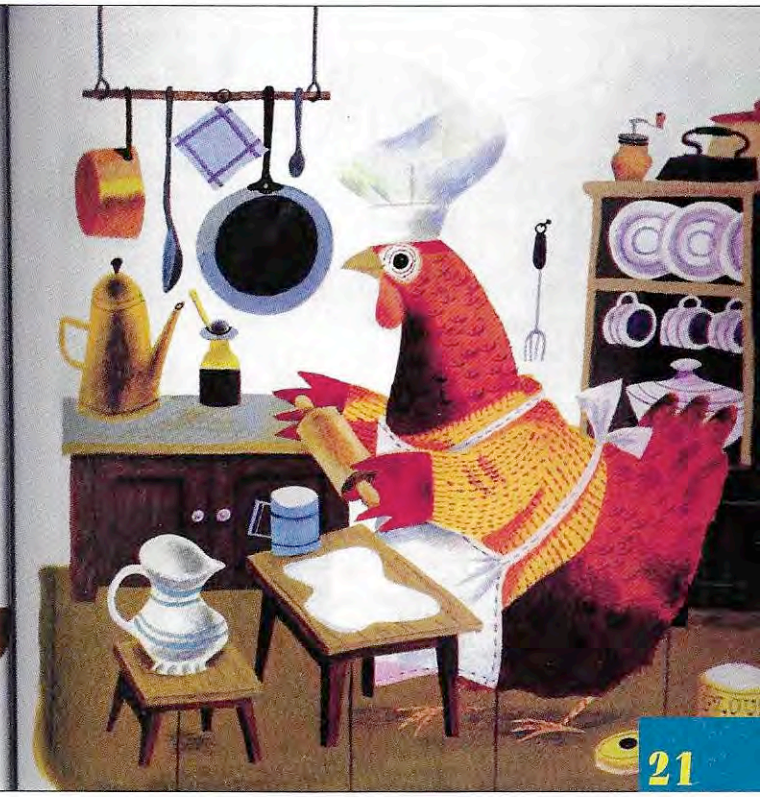
Despite his spiritual leanings, Miller had a quick temper that was often exacerbated by alcohol. A "nasty" side sometimes appeared when Miller drank and "John was a big drinker", admitted Bachman and a number of his friends and relatives. At a dinner party, she said, "every once in a while he would jump up and leave the table furious with somebody. Generally I'd go after him and say get back there. And he'd come back and it would be all over."

None of the people interviewed seemed to regard Miller's heavy "social drinking" as a problem. George Nicholson, who met Miller at Artists and Writers Press in the 1950s, described his relationship with Miller as that of "a drinking friend". Publishing was then called "a gentleman's enterprise", and, said Nicholson, "those were the days when publishers drank an enormous amount. I don't think I'd be able to say [if Miller was an alcoholic] in any medical sense. Because everybody drank very heavily."

Nicholson recalled a weekend costume party in Westport, Connecticut with "lots of drinking going on", J.P. and other Golden artists in attendance. One of the artists went into the woods, found a couple of beams, lashed them together, dressed himself in a loincloth with a crown of ferns on his head

Below: "The Little Red Hen", originally published in 1954, remains one of J.P. Miller's most popular Golden Books. [Copyright Simon and Schuster/Golden Books, 1954.]





"and strode across the lawn as Jesus – to the cheers of the crowd", among them J.P. "All of us did outrageous things and John was always willing to go along with those things", Nicholson said.[16]

Was he alcoholic? "No, no", said Bachman, explaining that "he didn't have to have a drink when he got up in the morning". But as the sun began to come down, "he would always mention that the sun was coming down. But he didn't drink during the day. He drank more socially, not by himself. But he could get very drunk."

Sometimes, however, there were drinks at a business lunch and sometimes the sun went down early. "He was so social", said his brother George, "he had all these friends all over the place. People would call, come in for lunch. Drinks in the afternoon. He couldn't stand to be alone at sundown. So there'd be a cocktail party at his or somebody else's place every night of the week."

Margot Bachman recalled the massive power blackout of 9 November 1965 that at exactly 5:27 p.m. shut down the entire Northeast area of the United States and large parts of Canada. By the time she made her way to Miller's apartment (after she and others directed traffic at Lexington and 42nd Street!), a candlelit cocktail party was underway with a score of neighbors from nearby high rise buildings and townhouses.

The revelry lasted till power was restored to Manhattan the next morning.

Miller enjoyed the social whirl he was so much a part of. There were cocktail parties attended by the likes of novelist Mary McCarthy and travel writer Santha Rama Rau; weekends with the Richard Scarrys in Connecticut or the Provensens in upstate New York; or driving down the east side of Manhattan with Margaret Wise Brown in her Chrysler convertible, and sneaking her great Dane into a Greenwich Village movie theatre; or visiting Wise's cottage in Maine with a Golden Book editor and building a fireplace.

Some summers he rented a house in the beautiful Georgica section of Long Island's East Hampton. Hollis Alpert observed Miller and friends there used their "intellectual bohemianism" as the basis for his 1958 novel "The Summer Lovers". Alpert's "sun, sea, sex and susceptibility" story concerns 19-year old Sally Pierce who becomes involved with her stepfather Andrew, Chris, a callow college graduate, and one Chadburn, described as "a hesitant illustrator". "Anyone reading it on certain Long Island beaches", said *Time* magazine, "need only look up from the pages to find the characters – if not the plot – all around him in the sand".[17]

Sometimes Miller visited the former Margot Macdonald at her homes in St. Thomas, V.I., Stonington, Connecticut, Water Mill, Long Island and Manhattan. Margot had become wealthy through her marriage to William Bachman, a Virgin Islands land surveyor and real estate developer and through her own publishing and editing of a weekly newspaper distributed on tourist flights from the USA to the Caribbean.

In many ways, John Parr Miller could have been a prototype of Bobby, the swinging single protagonist of the 1970 Broadway musical *Company*. Doted on by his married friends, charming, neurotic Bobby was unable or unwilling to commit to a romantic relationship, let alone marriage.

So it was with John Parr Miller until 30 January 1960. That day the nearly 47-year old illustrator married a dark-haired Swiss woman twenty years his junior in East Hampton's picturesque First Presbyterian Church. They met at Miller's building where she shared a floor-through apartment with a young Latvian woman whom Miller previously dated.

Margot Bachman thought the abrupt marriage "had something to do with my getting married. It was a shock to him that I would marry someone else and actually go off."

But George Miller believes his brother married because his wife "was the first woman who needed him. It brought out all his protectiveness. First time it ever happened in his life. He wanted to shelter her."

George Miller found his brother's wife "attractive and squirmy and pretty. And odd." Before the marriage, she was compliant. Afterward, she "turned out to be a predatory spender who'd be at [Henri] Bendel's every day and off on European vacations often by herself". She became "terribly possessive" and "didn't want him to see anyone".

She didn't allow John to attend his brother's engagement party . "We weren't sure he'd show up at our [1963] wedding", said Deborah Miller, George's wife. "And he was the best man!"[18]

After a trip to Ibiza, J.P.'s wife came back radically changed, perhaps because of a drug experience. When George and Deborah visited, she assumed a "teeny weeny girl's voice and stared at her shoes the whole time", literally shaking when she stood in front of them.

In the early 1980s, Leonard Marcus interviewed Miller as he was preparing to move out of his east side apartment. Packing

boxes were everywhere and Marcus recalls Miller's wife "vividly because she referred to him as 'Mr. Miller'. Said something like, 'I'll be going out for a walk now, Mr. Miller'. It seemed odd and I thought it was an affectionate conceit between them. But she was apparently a very bad influence on his life."

Below: Letter from J.P. Miller to illustrator Richard Scarry's young son Huck. Circa 1950s.

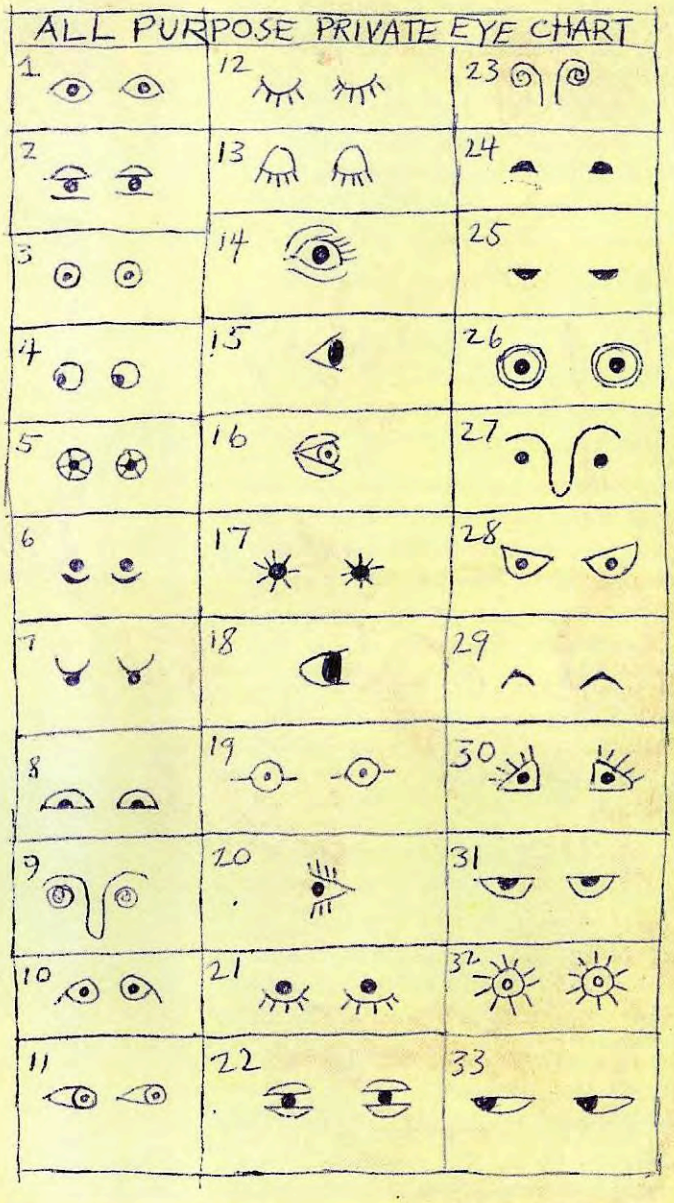
"She pauperized him", said George Miller. Running up bills at expensive stores, "she spent him down". They began to move into and out of apartments in the city, and Miller would "usually go live with somebody else".

J.P. complained to Marcus in their one and only interview that he'd led a "nomadic life".

Dear Huck.

I was thinking to myself yesterday 'Probably no one in Saugatuck has such a good collection of eyes as I have and if I were to pass it on to some deserving artist such as yourself it might be of lasting benefit not only to yourself but to all mankind, for example if you were asked to draw a slightly alarmed bear you simply consult the chart and you select number 8.

ALL PURPOSE PRIVATE EYE CHART



You think this is a badly drawn bear? But it demonstrates the use of the ALL Purpose Private Eye chart. USE WITH DISCRETION,

Love, Uncle John Parr

HOW DID I EVER MANAGE WITHOUT IT? CIRCA 1965

And he spoke "despairingly about himself to the effect that had that not been so, he would have been able to focus more on his artwork and accomplished more". Marcus recalled Miller as "mournful and sad about himself".

The Millers eventually moved out of expensive Manhattan and into an apartment in Manhassett on Long Island. It was the town where his brother George, an executive at the Grey advertising agency, and his family lived.

But J.P. and his wife moved there also "because there was a direct train line to Bergdof [Goodman]'s and other Fifth Avenue stores" where Mrs. Miller compulsively shopped. Soon she became "fascinated with Chinatown "and bought more and more terrible made-in-China cups and saucers".

"She liked to spend money", commented Bachman. "I think she saw a nice meal ticket." Some believed that J.P.'s wife displayed schizophrenic tendencies and, under great pressure from family and friends, he finally separated from her around 1985.

Fearing someone was poisoning her through the walls of her apartment, she shut off all the electricity and heat in her building and dug up the plants in front. When she was evicted, John Parr came to her aid. "He always loved her", said George Miller.

He moved her into a local motel for over six weeks at $100 a night. She then "lived in a boarding house on John's Social Security", said Margo Bachman with a hint of *schadenfreude*.

The couple were divorced in 1988 when Miller's savings were nearly depleted. "John at that point was so reduced [financially]", said George Miller, "he was living in borrowed houses and finally for the last ten years of his life came to live with us [from 1994 to 2004]".

Before moving into his brother's house in Manhassett, he continued to work on children's books. His later books – the "Little Rabbit" and "Little Tiger" series, both translated into many languages, among other projects – have their charms. The vibrant colors of a carefully drawn parrot and other detailed illustrations in *Do You Know Colors?* (Random House, 1979) are superb. But the invention and whimsy are more restricted and the drawing style conventional.

Leonard Marcus compares Miller's late period "to a situation of a great actor in a mediocre play. The material he was given wasn't up to the quality of his talent and he made much more of it than anyone had a right to expect."

Recently, while preparing Miller's artworks for the permanent collection of The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts, Marcus gained "a new appreciation" for what Miller was up to in his final works. "Truly admirable. It's almost a thankless task to work on things of that kind. It's touching, almost heartbreaking for such a person of such talent, you know?"

In his Golden Books heyday, Miller was kept busy by Lucille Ogle and Dorothy A. Bennett, two dominating editors who were professional rivals. Ogel was "a brilliant editor and businesswoman", according to George Nicholson, " who was very kind to the young people as long as they did their work. She had a teacherish [sic] manner and took no foolishness from anybody. She was known on occasion to hurl things."[19]

Ogel "thought [Miller] was the greatest illustrator of his generation", said Marcus. "I think part of Lucille's strategy was to keep the people she liked really busy", said Marcus. "Sometimes she tied them in with contracts that required that they do a certain number of books each year. There were attempts to have exclusive contracts with people, too."

Ms. Bennett was known to accompany Miller to vacation sites to assure he would meet deadlines – it was she who helped Miller build Margaret Wise Brown's chimney in Maine. There were "various attempts to monopolize the time and talent of the people they liked", said Marcus. "My sense is that [Miller] had a very fragile personality. If somebody told him to do something, he would do it."

But the problem with Miller's career was that unlike (say) Garth Williams, he never illustrated a breakout book that became a classic. Williams' career included Golden Books, but also other publishers, such as Harpers, and with writers such as E. B. White (*Stuart Little*; *Charlotte's Web*), Laura Ingalls Wilder (*Little House on the Prairie*), Margery Sharp (*The Rescuers*) and George Selden (*The Cricket in Times Square*).

J.P. Miller never gained that degree of immortality, nor did he ever win a Caledcott Medal for distinguished picture book illustration. He was never well-matched to important writers or books that would have elevated his reputation as an artist accordingly. "Miller was more in the trenches", said Marcus.

During his last ten years, Miller lived in a sunny upstairs bedroom in his brother's house, reading and working on projects that never came to fruition. "He had always been careless with money", said his brother, "never invested and never understood the long-term benefits of owning a home. Late in life he confided that he thought that the money [he earned] would keep on coming forever, not realizing that his

editors would retire or that most of his books would be withdrawn from the market." Living rent-free and with his brother managing his money, his worth eventually rose to about $300,000.

Occasionally, he appeared with his family at a social function: an gallery opening of paintings by animator Willis Pyle, whom he knew at Disney's; or a visit to Margot Bachman's Long Island home.

Bachman recalled one such occasion as he neared his 90th year: "He [and George and Deborah Miller] came out to my place in Water Mill. [John] wanted to take us all to lunch". Bachman suggested they go to Duryea's Dock in Montauk, a seafood on the bay and off they went.

"I love it, " she said, "but it is rather casual. They have a little window to the kitchen where you give your food order, then they yell 'It's ready!' John was furious that I had chosen this because he wanted it to be 'a nice lunch'. I said, 'But, John, it is a great lunch. It's a wonderful setting on the bay', and we talked him into it. He was a snob, yes. And so he began to like it because a seagull came along and perched on a railing. He liked that and he began to look around at the sea. And by the end of the meal it was okay."

The last time she saw J.P. alive was on his 90th birthday on 31 August 2003 at a small party given in his honor at a Connecticut restaurant by Agnes Risom, widow of Ole Risom, Western Publishing art director and Miller's close friend. "John was very, very quiet."

In a photo, Miller resembles an elderly elf: tiny, dressed in coat and tie, his receding white hair revealing a large forehead. His eyes stare straight at the camera. His expression is, as Bachman once described it, "not really a sneer, but its sort of prove-yourself. Who are you? Am I going to like you? I might if you turn out to be something that I like."

Miller's mind slowly dimmed and he spent his last days in a nursing facility near Manhassett. "It was as nice a facility as you could find", said his brother, "but John was such a loner that group activities was not his style. A snob to the end. Nurses would try to dance with him and he would cringe."

Miller died of pneumonia on 29 October 2004 at Winthrop Hospital in Long Island. He was cremated and buried with his father, mother and stepmother in the family plot at Beechwoods, a Civil War cemetery ("Quite a society cemetery", said George Miller) in Westchester county near New Rochelle.

The artistic legacy of John Parr Miller is, like the artist himself, small but influential. It includes his visually appealing character designs for classic early Disney animated features and his masterful storyboard sketches for *The Reluctant Dragon*, whose rich expressiveness is a continuing inspiration for storyboard artists.

Likewise, illustrators can profit from a close study of Miller's prolific work in the children's book field. Two score of his books were in print at the time of his death. "The Little Red Hen", first published in 1954, has sold over 200,000 copies; in 2001, it became one of the first six titles in Little Golden Books Classic Line. Although his style changed through the years, his inventive designs, communicative layouts, pleasurable forms and coloring, and sheer charm are constant.

His art is as charming and life-loving as he apparently was. "He could mostly brush aside the nettles in his life and enjoy the good parts", said Osmond Molarsky. "He had a legion of friends."

John Canemaker is an animator, the author of ten books on animation history, and a full professor and the Executive Director of the Animation program at NYU Tisch School of the Arts Kanbar Institute of Film & Television.

His animated short* The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation *won an Oscar in 2006.

Notes

1. Margot Macdonald Bachman letter to JC, 30 September 2006; MMB interviewed by JC, 5 December 2006, NYC. All references to MMB are from these two sources.
2. According to George E. Miller, the informal name of "Jack" may have been "appropriate to the collegiality of the Disney team effort", but "as an illustrator John would be identified as one of the originators of the work, and he wanted to be taken seriously". Thus, he assumed the name J.P. Miller (or, often, John Parr Miller). Another reason: "there are almost as many Millers as Smiths". George E. Miller email to JC, 14 March 2007.
3. "Little Chipmunk Wins the Swan Dive", unpublished manuscript by Osmond Molarsky.
4. George Miller email to JC, 28 January 2007.
5. Osmond Molarsky letter to JC, 19 December 2005.
6. Osmond Molarski letter to George E. Miller, 1 September 2001.
7. George E. Miller email to JC, 28 January 2007.
8. Leonard S. Marcus interview with JC, 15 January 2007. All Marcus quotes are from this interview.
9. Barbara Bader, "American Picture Books from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within" (McMillan Publishing Co., N.Y., 1976), p. 288.
10. "An Interview with George M. Nicholson" by Leonard S. Marcus. *The Horn Book Magazine*, March/April 2007, pp. 127–139.
11. George E. Miller email to JC, 14 March 2007.
12. In 1947 "Dumbo" became the Disney studio's first Little Golden Book title. By 1956, the Disney series had appeared in 13 languages in 17 countries. "A History of Disney Publishing", Walt Disney Company brochure, c. 2001.
Through the years, Disney book illustrators included current and former Disney studio artists, such as Eyvind Earle, John Hench, Bianca Majolie, Campbell Grant, Al Dempster, Bob Moore, X. Atencio, Retta Scott Worcester, Melvin Shaw, Edgar Starr, Ted Parmalee, Richard Kelsey, Don MacLaughlin, and Tom Oreb.
Former Disney artists who worked for Golden Books but not on Disney Golden Books included Mary Blair, Aurelius Battaglia, Henry Tanous, Gustaf Tenggren, Martin Provensen (his wife Alice never worked at Disney) and J.P. Miller.
13. George M. Nicholson interview by JC, 31 May 2006.
14. "A Remembrance of John Parr Miller" by George E. Miller, 2004.
15. Nicholson interview.16. Nicholson, *The Horn Book Magazine*; also, Nicholson interview.
17. *Time*, 21 July 1958.
18. Deborah Miller interview by JC, 15 November 2005.19. Nicholson, *The Horn Book Magazine*.